

TAHITI: ISLE OF DREAMS

*Mr. Keable has also written:—*

**NOVELS**

Simon Called Peter.

The Mother of All Living.

Peradventure, or The Silence of God.

Recompense :

A sequel to Simon Called Peter.

**SHORT STORIES.**

The Drift of Pinions.

**ESSAYS AND TRAVEL.**

A City of the Dawn.

Standing By.

Pilgrim Papers.

**DEVOTIONAL:**

The Loneliness of Christ.

The Perpetual Sacrifice.

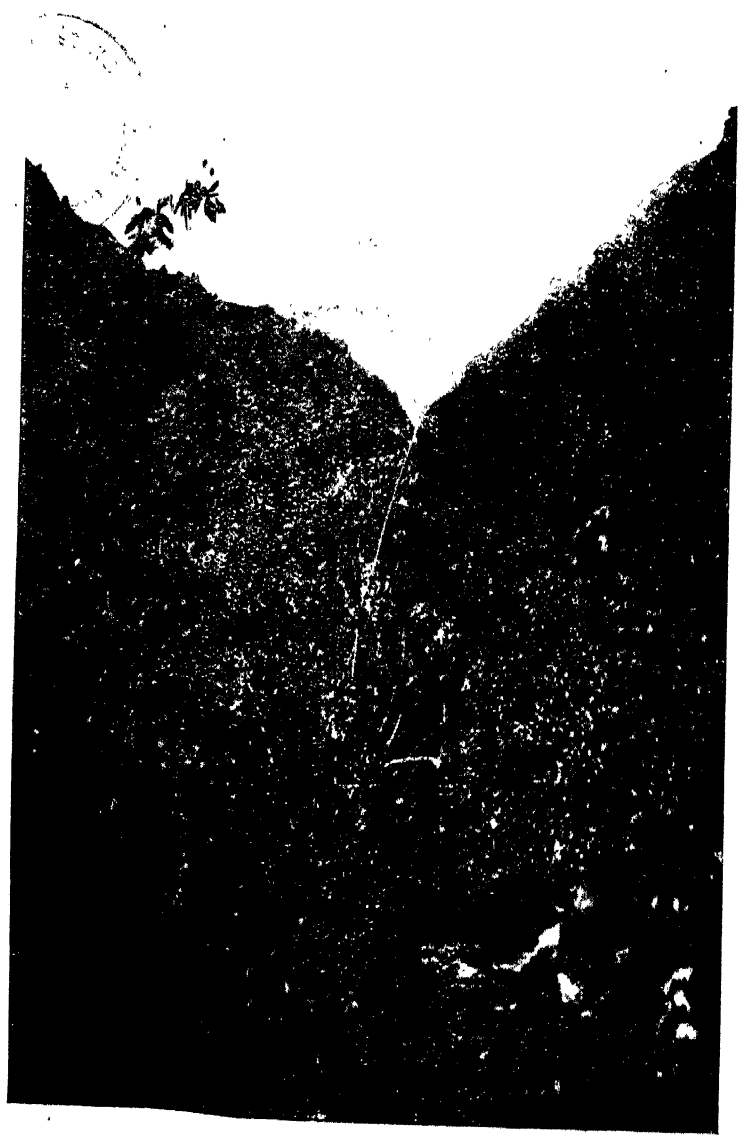
This Same Jesus.

**VERSE.**

Songs of the Narrow Way.

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And various Missionary Books.



"A scene of grandeur and beauty."

*Frontispiece.*

# TAHITI: ISLE OF DREAMS

By

ROBERT KEABLE



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR  
AND  
WILLIAM CRAKE

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PATERNOSTER ROW



## PREFACE

OF the making of books upon the South Seas there is no end, and there probably will be no end for a long time. For example, a novel of Polynesia as it is to-day has not yet been written, and should be. But of books about Tahiti in especial there might be thought to be enough.

I thought so myself at first, but when I came to know the island a little I was not so sure. It has been written up from the geographical, the historical, the missionary, and the romantic standpoint—especially the romantic—but of one aspect of it little has been said. A score of writers and artists of note have sought in Tahiti the fulfilment of a dream, and I do not think that their dreams have ever been gathered together. Here, then, I make the attempt. That is the thread that holds these chapters together. A local photographer,

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## Preface

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Mr. William Crake, and I, have gone over the ground that meant so much to Loti, to Gauguin, to Robert Louis Stevenson, to Rupert Brooke and to many others, and for the pictures he is chiefly to be thanked. For the rest, I have not attempted to labour my point. But you shall see why they came and why the great majority passed on. Maybe some who follow will learn to tread more softly ; and maybe others, heirs of the civilisation which has reduced the island life to what it is to-day, will ask themselves a question which I know that I, for one, have answered in the negative.

ROBERT KEABLE.

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CHAPTER I

**THE ISLAND LANDFALL**





## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

### CHAPTER I

#### THE ISLAND LANDFALL

IF the very words 'An Island Landfall' do not make you see visions and dream dreams turn this page and read no more. You must be of the salt of the earth, who do their jobs, at desk or factory, in season and out, without real complaint, and who find at Margate or Torquay an ideal holiday. Without you the Western world could not get on, and without you, I daresay, the present writer could never have got off, for if the words turned your head and fired your blood as they do for a few of us, there would be created a situation in Europe and America with which the lords who

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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rule would be at their wits' end to cope. But if the phrase, faintly crying to your heart, makes you pause a moment, read on while there is unfolded a story more arresting than any novel, more tragic than any sorrow, more lovely than any dream.

My introduction to it I owe to Robert Louis Stevenson who, in general terms, describes the approach to any South Sea Island. He says (and I make no apology for quoting him at length):

“ The first experience can never be repeated. The first love, the first sunrise, the first South Sea Island, are memories apart and touched a virginity of sense. On the 28th of July 1888 the moon was an hour down by four in the morning. In the east a radiating centre of brightness told of the day ; and beneath, on the skyline, the morning bank was already building, black as ink. . . . Although the dawn was thus preparing, the sun was not up till six ; and it was half-past five before we could distinguish our expected islands from the clouds on the horizon. Eight degrees south and the day two hours a-coming. The interval was passed on deck in the silence of expectation,

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## The Island Landfall

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the customary thrill of landfall heightened by the strangeness of the shores that we were then approaching. . . .

“ The land heaved up in peaks and rising vales ; it fell in cliffs and buttresses ; its colour ran through fifty modulations in a scale of pearl and rose and olive ; and it was crowned above by opalescent clouds. The suffusion of vague hues deceived the eye ; the shadows of clouds were confounded with the articulations of the mountain ; and the isle and its unsubstantial canopy rose and shimmered before us like a single mass. There was no beacon, no smoke of towns to be expected, no plying pilot. Somewhere, in that palē phantasmagoria of cliff and cloud, our haven lay concealed. . . .”

So, and it would be interesting to collect the first impressions of all those many writers who have thus approached Tahiti. I have done so, and I meant to pass them on. But I am not sure that it is worth doing. They range from the rhapsodies of Lady Brassey—“ The sky above is of azure blue ; a girdle of luxuriant and intensely green tropical vegetation, gorgeous with gaily-coloured leaves

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and blossoms and golden-hued fruit, encompasses this delightful harbour ; while corals, sea-weeds, zoophytes and fish of every possible tint and colour, are seen, as in a wild garden, beneath the transparent waters on which we are floating ”—to the quaint conceits of George Calderon who found “ the ocean so big and vague, the island so small and definite. It was as if the captain were a conjurer and had pulled it out of his pocket. It was cold and grey out there ; the sea was rough and the deck was wet ; then, suddenly—Tahiti ! . . . One can fancy the look of stupid surprise on the face of the god with the fishing-rod.”

That is one way of looking at it, but it was not so that the island opened up to me. I had been journeying for about twenty years to reach the goal, for when the words of magic first burned themselves into my brain it had been impossible to pack traps and go. Looking back now, I can see that the road that led to Tahiti has been a fairy story in itself, with plenty of ogres and giant castles to be slain or stormed *en route*. At one time, in my wildest dreams, I should never have thought that I should come as I eventually did,

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## The Island Landfall

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but, at the moment, like a dream also, it was commonplace itself. I woke in the cabin of a liner, breakfasted on porridge and eggs and bacon, packed, heard that the island was sighted, and went on deck to see. Sure enough there was a cloud on the cloudy pearl-grey and light-blue of the Pacific horizon which was a shade more substantial than a cloud. It grew, and they said it was the island of Moorea. Within an hour Moorea was plain to see a mile or two on our port and there was another cloud upon our starboard. That was Tahiti.

One paced restlessly across the deck from one side to the other. I had never heard of Moorea (for it used, I now know, to be called Eimeo) and it was so beautiful that it was hard to tear oneself away ; but I was bound for Tahiti, swimming in mist there on the starboard, and was haunted by the fear that I would miss something of the magic if I did not stand and gaze. If there were in Tahiti anything like these writhen, fantastic, lovely peaks vested in a riot of fern and bush and trees ; anything like that gentle shore-fringe of coco-nut groves, deserted and lonely, sun-shot,

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

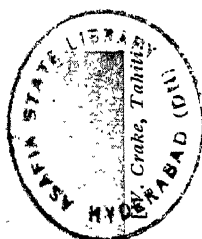
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green and brown ; anything like that reef of creaming murmuring surf ; anything, above all, like that tessellated lagoon of purple and emerald and sapphire in every shade, then would I see Tahiti shape herself in her mists and never take my eyes from her. There were, and there were not. Tahiti is Queen of the South. She has everything that Moorea has to offer, but she holds true sway only in her more remote districts and you must do homage to obtain her. Mostly her visitors do not. They are content to see her where she sits on Papeete Bay, tamed, demoralised and a little shamed, and since it is so easy (for she is lovely even so) they write home fantastic lies.

Not, then, can one make the island landfall of Tahiti as did Wallis or Cook, unless one is very rich and very wise. If I could see her first again, knowing what I do and with means which I have not, I would steal upon her fifty miles away from the course of the liners and the Papeete anchorage. For ever, come how or where or when you will, must she first appear unsubstantial dream and then far-lifting remote untrodden heights bearing up the clouds. For ever must the music of her



Papeete Quay.



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## The Island Landfall

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surf break upon your ears and the wealth of her soft groves and wooded slopes glad your eyes. But, as details stand out upon her, I would rather be passing the barrier of her reef where no boat other than a simple fishing-canoe or two would hail me. In translucent water, undefiled as in the dawn of all, I would drop my anchor. Off shores unpeopled my ship should lie, and on sands strewn only with the wreckage of coral and the treasure of the bush and sea would I first set foot. For it can still be done, though I shall write neither how nor where.

As it is, one picks out the corrugated iron of rectangular stores, the spires of churches whose builders did not think of the holiness of beauty, the lines of villa residences. The pilot comes off in a motor-boat. Taxis wait upon the quay. Notices of picture-postcard and curio shops tell you to take the first to the right and the second to the left and in three minutes taste even here the full joys of the tourist, and, as you leave the gangway a being whom Mrs. Smith erroneously calls a native will push a cinema advertisement into your hand. You will be told that you can see there



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the real hula-hula dance and the lovely girls of the South Seas. You can book a seat by telephoning from your restaurant or hotel. You will deserve what you get.

Poor little Papeete ! They dub her, the writers and visitors, the " Paris of the South Seas." God forbid, but if you want a Paris in the South Seas go to Papeete and deserve what you get. That is, of course, what most tourists do want, and to do the masters of the place fair justice the chief ingredients are provided. Papeete is the only town in ten thousand miles of ocean—fortunately. Papeete wears her unnatural dress as well as ever she can. Papeete is well lied about, and she has a veil which the lies prevent most visitors from lifting. Papeete is dear enough to me to make her outraging a sorrow, but she is also dear enough to be something of a shame. I would sooner live anywhere in the island than in Papeete, but of the world's provincial towns that I know, I would sooner live in Papeete. Papeete clusters on a bay at the foot of hills with a wonderful sheet of lagoon before her and she never ceases trying to subdue those who would prostitute her. She flings creepers



[W. Crane, Tahiti.

“ In translucent water . . . I would drop my anchor.”

p. 20.

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## The Island Landfall

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scarlet and purple and gold over Oregon pine and corrugated iron, and she has to do it herself for hardly a soul tries to help her. Be you so kind as but to drop a seed and forget it, she makes of it a flower. Do you build a fence, she transforms it into a hedge. And day and night no power that men have yet discovered can tame or eliminate her sunrises and sunsets.

A friend of mine, a young and struggling author, recently sent home articles and photographs of Tahiti. His agent submitted his stuff to the magazines, and wrote to him of the result. In effect he said : " They say you write well and can easily market your goods. But if you photograph, your pictures must show no sign of a telegraph pole or a motor-car, and if you write you must not abuse that conception of a real South Sea island which recent writers have done so much to inscribe on the public mind and which the public wants." He shewed me that letter, and hence in part this book. That is the way a mock has been made of the Tahiti that I love. In these articles I will tell you of the true Tahiti which I hope you will never visit. I shall not tell you of the ' native ' market,

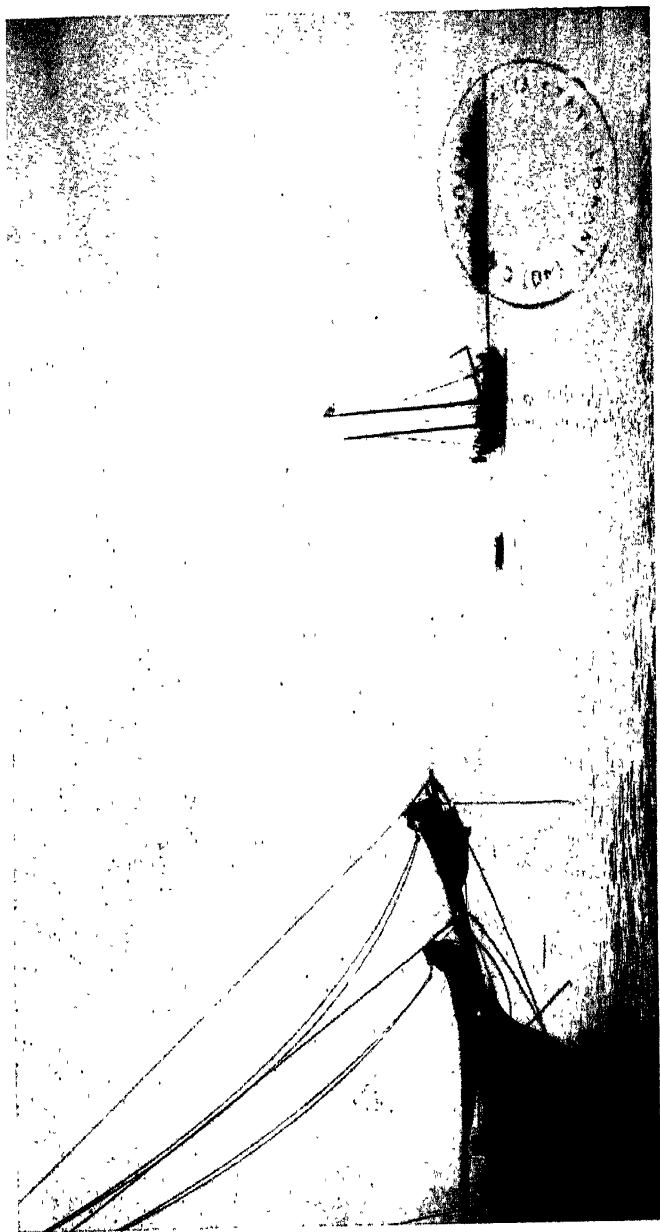
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the 'open-air washing place,' the 'beautiful women' of Papeete, and all the rest of the stuff in the books. You might easily be disappointed; keep your dream. Only if you can see beauty beneath a mask of vulgarity, only if you can perceive a spirit, only if you are willing to strip yourself at a shrine, should you come. And in that event, you will linger in Papeete until you have raised her veil and seen the face of the Queen beneath and caught the message of her eyes. Then you will go out of the little town, the poor little 'Paris of the South Seas,' and seek the country districts, understanding that there lingers something which is worth your search.

Hence the landfall which I shall remember all my days was not my first but my second. We had been out in a hundred and fifty ton island schooner and as the day died, coming from the north, picked up the land. It tossed a bit out at sea, and there was scud of rain in the air. First, then, one could see the great peaks of Orohena and Aorai, hung with cloud, raking the sky. Then above the whistling of the wind one caught far off the thunder of the surf in a heavy trade and our course was



"A sheet of lagoon."

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## The Island Landfall

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altered that we might coast well outside along the reef. Night fell. There were, for an hour or so, occasional stars before the mists blew off and revealed them in their glory. I tried to sleep, but the romance of it held me and at last I made my way forrard to see all that might be seen.

I tucked myself into the bows and hung there, now swung high over the lengthening rollers, now carried down to the dark hissing waters. The native seamen clustered in little groups, smoking, talking a little, but mostly silent. Occasionally a match spluttered. The steersman gripped the wheel right aft, and, balanced on the top of the saloon, the skipper directed him with waves of the hand. In the starlight I could see them quite plainly except when some roll of the mast hid them for a moment. Presently a hand was sent up the ratlines to get a better view and he swung there hour by hour, calling, in melodious Tahitian, the various sailing points.

A light gleamed : Point Venus. We stood out across the bay of Matavai. As we neared the farther head round which lies Papeete more lights gleamed of fishermen on the reef and in canoes.

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Now we were round the point and the lights of the curving water-front of the little town shone out like fallen stars. We held on. A man came forrard and I asked him our sailing points. He pointed out at length two red stars which we must get in line in order to swing in through the entrance in the reef. The wind sung in the cordage, the spray whipped one's face, we seemed to ride slowly over a limitless ocean.

I thought as I swung there how at last one got a human proportion back to life. The mass of Tahiti loomed out like some vast unknown continent whereon the whole pageant of human life might be lived and fought, its great mountains brooding above us, its great folds reaching down to the infinite sea. The little ship lifted and groaned and strained, and I was part of her, and gloried in her, and suffered with her. When some Hotel Cecil is wafted across the Atlantic in five days you think nothing except that the steward might bring your whiskey-and-soda a shade quicker. But out there in the dark night making an island landfall I knew I was a scrap of a thing and that the gods were gods. It is all a lie that

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## The Island Landfall

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Tahiti is a spot on the map and man a pretty good Almighty. He is a little thing, with a soul for the winds and the seas to sing to and a body that wants the smell of roasting fish and a bright red fire. But he is not a slave either, crawling out by the 8.15 and back by the 5.20 and keeping an infinitesimal portion of some great affair's accounts at its good will and pleasure. He is a man, and can get into his own canoe and spear his own fish and brave the gods and claim his catch by the might of his own right arm. And it's good, I thought, to be brown and bare and . . .

The look-out man sung out suddenly and the helmsman brought her round. A stone's throw on either side the hungry waves raced at and foamed upon the reef. An outrigger in the very passage rocked dizzily at our passing. The schooner ceased to pitch ; the lights shone steadily. One could make out coco-nuts. And as I stood and stretched I saw that the dark night was flooding with new light. I caught a stay as we swung to our anchorage, and watched the radiance steal among the dark tree-masses on the shore ; and I knew as I looked that the Tahitians relate but



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truly when they say that from the unused bits of pearly dawns the great gods fashioned the eyes of Eve.

But before you come to that, you will have sat out under the trees on the water front, where the fountain plashes all day long and the sunlight filters down through the complete cavern of the trees and the schooners from remote seas tie up to half-buried guns and anchors to off-load their wares. You will have sat on till the evening sun sets behind Moorea. . . . No ; honestly I can hardly write of it. It can scarcely be attempted. There is a little quarantine island, you see, a few hundred yards from the shore, a line of reef, a great bay. There will be white schooners to catch the glow. There will be clouds, for the Pacific always has clouds and subdued colour by day. And then, suddenly, on top of all that, will be thrown the frenzy of an advent, the conflagration of a spiritual world in flames, the light of all heaven and all hell flung to the infinite stars.



"The Evening Sun sets behind Moorea."

CHAPTER II

**THE PASSING OF A PEOPLE**

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## The Passing of a People

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### CHAPTER II

#### THE PASSING OF A PEOPLE

THERE are two roads out of Papeete, the one running east and north to Arue and Papenoo, the other west and south to Punaauia, Papeari and the peninsula of Taiarapu which is hung on to the main island by a thread. They do not go right round the island and meet, because there are rivers which have not been bridged and often cannot be forded, but the first takes us to a great and famous valley up which I propose in imagination to walk, to return by yet another which strikes the other road. In your mind's eye, then, swing your shoulders and come with me out of the little town on the road east.

It is a famous road and we shall not get far. A

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short way out a bridge spans a torrent and a side road turns inland at right angles, giving us a wonderful view of the Diadem in the distance. The Diadem is a diadem in truth, a great rocky unclimbed mass which dominates the valley four thousand feet below it. Its big brother, Mount Aorai, towers a couple of thousand feet more alongside it, but he is of a different shape, is almost always wreathed in mist, and is not visible from here. Between the two of them, however, flows the Fautaua river, a pathway into the wild interior of the island and a gorge renowned in story.

It was Pierre Loti who made it famous, and himself with it. He was the first, perhaps, really to bring Tahiti before the notice of the travelling world, the first to start the stream of visitors, the first to lift the curtain of a passing race. As Lieutenant Viaud of the French navy he was stationed in these waters in 1879, seeing with his own eyes what he so vividly describes in his book, *Le Mariage de Loti*.

The novel is the story of a young officer on an English ship who is made welcome at the court of the Tahitian Queen, Pomare Vahini, whose husband



“The Diadem in the distance.”

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## The Passing of a People

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is a lunatic and who 'reigns' by courtesy of the French government. It is a pathetic court. The Pomare family, who furnished the last and least worthy kings and queens of Tahiti, had been made the stalking-horse of the European powers which successively protected the island. Wallis began it in 1767 for, with the incredible and innocent insolence of his time, he had no sooner landed on an island which for a thousand years had belonged to a highly developed and civilised people than he took possession of it in the name of King George and henceforth regarded any attack on his ship or crew as 'treachery' or 'rebellion' on the part of the 'savages.' Nevertheless, backed by the missionaries who had landed in his particular district, the local chief, called Pomare I, was encouraged to claim overlordship of the whole island and supported by the muskets and cannon of his new suzerain, the English King, in his attempt. Of the whole story and heroic stand of the nationalists, leading to the death of the hero Opuhara, I shall not here write, but when at length Europe did another shuffle and handed Tahiti over to the French, the new master went

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one better still. The last Pomare's realm was declared to include the Paumotus, the Marquesas and the Austral Islands, and the whole annexed.

Events followed their normal course. The shadow of power ever grew less. The Pomare family contented itself with alcohol and masquerade. Viaud found a queen who was addressed as 'Her Majesty' by ships' captains and visitors, who, so to speak, camped out in native fashion in a big European palace, and whose court of maidens danced and flirted and sang and drank the fleeting hours away. Loti of the romance was offered a 'wife' by the Queen who had taken a fancy to him, it being carefully explained that the connection was only temporary. He lived in the shadow of the palace. He slept once in the 'king's' bedroom, His Majesty at the time being too drunk to hurt him. He talked with the Queen, and realised clearly what she might have been. He drew a moving picture of the demoralisation of a race whom missionary and politician had condemned to death by inertia.

Yet that in itself is not the main interest of the book. The larger tragedy is repeated in minia-



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## The Passing of a People

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ture, and for the child-wife Rarahu. That is an idyll of the most moving kind. Here, in the beauty and solitude of this lovely river valley, Loti first saw her.

“ It was about noon, on a calm and scorching day. The young Tahitian women who frequented Fautaua, drowsy with the heat, were lying on the grassy bank close to the stream, their feet dipping in the clear cool water. The same grey shade lay over us, vertical and motionless ; large black velvet butterflies marked with lavender eyes fluttered languidly past, or rested on us, as though their sheeny wings were too heavy to bear them ; the air was charged with heady and unfamiliar perfume ; quite unconsciously I abandoned myself to this enervating existence, overborne by the Oceanian spell.

“ The undergrowth of mimosa and guava trees in the background of the picture, was suddenly parted ; there was a gentle rustle of leaves, and two girls peered forth studying the situation like two mice peeping out of a hole. They were crowned by head-dresses of leaves to shelter their heads from the heat of the sun ; they were girt

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with *pareus* (loin-cloth) of dark blue with broad yellow stripes ; their slender dusky bodies were otherwise bare ; their long black hair hung loose. . . . The prettier of the two was Rarahu."

This was at the first big pool to which one comes ascending the valley, and it is still lovely despite the fact that the Papeete water-works are here. Here come still native women, but not as Loti saw them. But Rarahu and her friend had but strayed down the river from their own especial pool, near to their father's lonely house, and to that he followed. In the days of leave from his ship he was always there. "It was a retired nook, vaulted over by tall bread-fruit trees with their thick leaves enclosed by acacias, guavas and sensitive plants. The cool water danced noisily over the small polished pebbles, and a murmur from the lower basin came up from the distance, with the laughter of women."

Here is the pool of Loti. It is still to-day practically as it was then, for not many tourists reach it seeing that it is further from Papeete than Loti says and that the path is overgrown with weeds and bushes. But still the water cascades



“ Here is the pool of Loti.”

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## The Passing of a People

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down in foam beneath the hanging *bura*o and orange and guava trees, and still one might dawdle the live-long day with the song of the stream in one's ears. Tread softly for you tread on a dream. Not that the average tourist does. If he comes at all, he usually brings with him half-caste girls of the town, whom he calls 'natives' and who get drunk in order to dance for him. True, there is no one else to bring. The Rarahus of Tahiti are no more.

But it was not so yet in Loti's time. Here, in this valley, was enacted in its own way the tragedy of this people. Our author tells how a Chinaman beguiled the laughter-loving unsophisticated child with the promise of a fairy dress, and—well, to-day, there are celestial eyes in half the children of the island. But her lover saved Rarahu for the moment; they climbed this valley hand in hand. Where the great tree-ferns make dense shade above the head, they played together in the warm and scented air; where the great waterfall tumbles nine hundred feet into its rocky pool they peeped like children together. They saw the great peak of old Aorai behind catch the clouds and brave the

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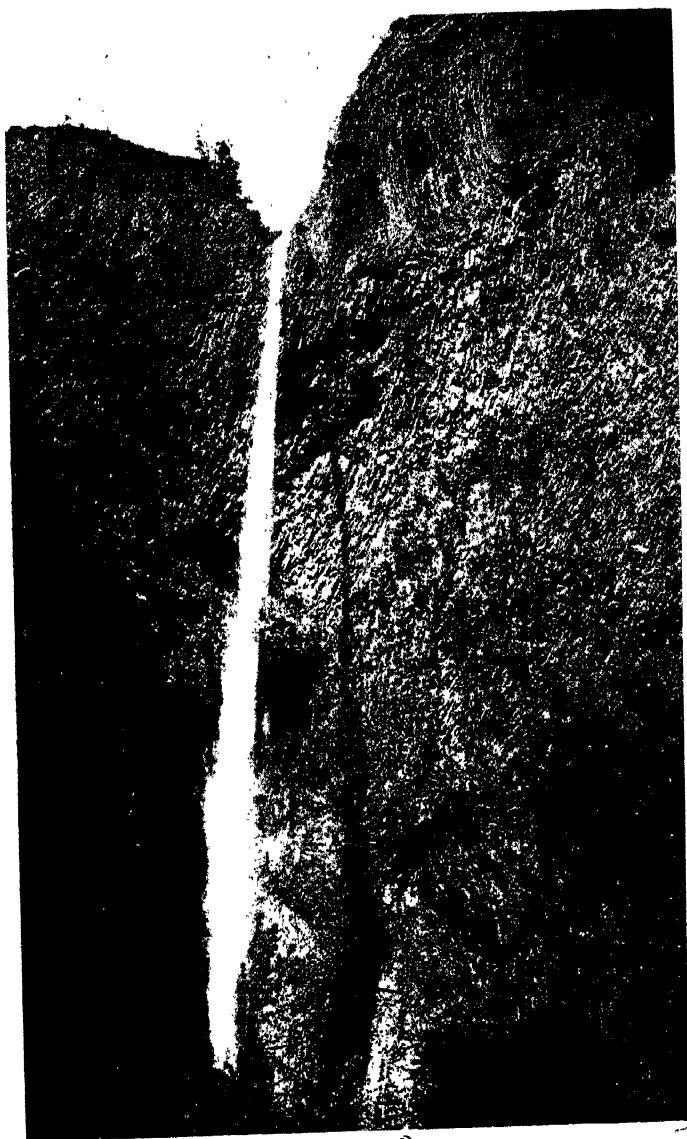
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tropical storms, and Rarahu repeated the songs and legends of her people.

“ In the depths of this gorge the scene was one of pure enchantment. The most lavish vegetation grew tangled in the shade, dripping and revelling in the perpetual deluge ; creepers clung to the steep black walls and among them grew tree-ferns, mosses and exquisite varieties of maiden-hair. The water from above, pulverized to dust in its fall, came down like a torrent of rain, a rush of furious dishevelled drops. It collected below, foaming fiercely in the basins it had hollowed in the rock smoothed by the patient hand of ages, and then danced away in a stream again, pursuing its way under the greenery.

“ A fine dust of water hung like a veil over all, and just overhead appeared the sky as if seen from the bottom of a well, and the heads of the cliffs half-hidden in dark clouds.

“ What most struck Rarahu was this perennial stir in the heart of such utter solitude, this great noise without life—nothing but inert Nature following, during incalculable ages, the impulse given at the creation.”



“ In the depths of this gorge the scene was one of pure enchantment.”

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## The Passing of a People

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Pathetically she mixed it all with fragments of the Christianity of which she was so proud and which she still thought would be a bond of union between herself and this man. Allow for the element of fiction and romance: this is a story that has been repeated a thousand times in fair Tahiti. When Loti forgets her on some court affair or European business, she reproaches him with making but a plaything of her. "I knew it—I knew I was only a little contemptible creature—a plaything you allowed yourself. To you white men that is all we ever can be. But what shall I gain by being angry? I am alone in the world—with you or with another man, what can it signify? . . . Here I am, and that is an end of it." He furiously denies it. But he must leave her at last. Oh, yes, he will come back!

He actually did so the year after, and she was waiting for him. She has developed a little cough which he just notices. He brought back a cage of little singing birds which they released in this glen, and the idyll was played over again—the long languorous bathes, the climbs the through ferns, the twining of wreaths with Tiare Tahiti

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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and English roses, the dances beneath the moon. When he must go once more she is sent out into the country to be 'safe' by the Queen's own arrangement. And so again he sails away.

Ah, well ! Loti of the novel could not get back, Viaud the author had other fish to fry. Rarahu wrote him letters : " Dear friend, my little Loti, my only thought in Tahiti, I salute thee by the true God." A year later : " I am grievously surprised at receiving no letter from you, because I have written to you five times and not a word from you has ever reached me. Perhaps it has happened that you no longer remember me. . . . Dear object of my grief, why do you forget me ? " And later again : " O my fragrant flower of evening, my heart is sick to death that I can see you no more. O my star of the morning, my eyes melt into tears because you do not return." And she did not write again.

But in time he had messages from other hands. The cough was worse. She was tired of waiting. She was in Papeete. It was definitely phthisis. She had other lovers. She had taken to rum. She was dying. She had disappeared.



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## The Passing of a People

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There is nothing lovelier in its way than Loti's valley, pool and fall. You can make your way up the stream and stand where the water disperses in mist ere it reaches the ground, or you can climb up through the tropical woods, pick the wild roses and come after a scramble to the very lip of the fall. The wide serene sun-shot gulf opens at your feet. Behind, the great peak stands sentinel over hidden vales which perhaps no man has trod for a hundred years and no white man ever. It is very still, There may be a few small birds fluttering in the very steep of the dizzy leap and there may sail over the void the white tropic bird with its streaming tail feathers. But otherwise it is very still. Rarahu and her sisters have entered the great silence and of her race there is none to mourn.

We leave the valley of Fautaua and strike the main road again, a road which witnessed yet another step towards the passing of the race. By an arrestingly interesting coincidence, in June 1891, Paul Gauguin, another great Frenchman—in yellow shoes, red cravat and immense green hat-band—landed in Tahiti. The French Republic had, at that date, appointed a negro governor,

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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Lacascade, over this land in which men and women of Aryan stock had attained to physical perfection and beauty of life not perhaps known in Europe since the days of ancient Greece, and in that month died Pomare, the last King of Tahiti. He lay a-dying as the artist first walked the streets of Papeete, instantly arrested by the grief of the Tahitians and the indifference of the half-castes and French. "Tous les Européens" (he says in *Noa-Noa*), "commerçants, fonctionnaires, officiers et soldats, continuaient à rire et à chanter dans les rues, tandis que les naturels, avec des airs graves, s'entretenaient à voix basse autour du palais." True Pomare never "enjoyed more than the veriest shadow of sovereignty, and had indeed 'abdicated' ten years before, but at least he was the sole remaining figure of the ancient regime. Gauguin arrived in time to see him die and to hear the official diplomatic speeches which civilisation offered the last Tahitian at the grave in place of the fervour and poetry of his ancestors. Their true value was apparent even on the road home. "Sur la route, à la debandade, l'indifférence des Français donnant le ton, tout ce peuple, si



[Paul Engdahl.

Tahitian Men.

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## The Passing of a People

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grave depuis plusieurs jours, recommençait à rire. Les vahines (the women) reprenaient le bras de leurs tanes (men), parlaient haut, dodelinaient des fesses, tandis que leurs larges pieds nus foulait lourdement la poussière du chemin." And he concludes rightly: "Avec lui disparaissaient les dernier vestiges des traditions anciennes. Avec lui se fermait l'histoire maorie. C'était bien fini. La civilisation, hélas!—soldatesque, négoce et fonctionnariste—triomphait." As a signal of their triumph, the very palace became Government offices as it is to this day, and in a villa opposite, almost invisible behind thick trees, his Queen awaits the end. The possible heir, Prince Hinoi, died in the influenza epidemic.

We are then upon that very road of which Paul Gauguin writes. A couple of miles or so further on we turn off to the sea by a side track which comes out upon an open grassy space whereon stands a Protestant church with the tomb of Pomare beyond. Every step of the way is luxuriant with flowering shrubs and overhung with trees, on the left the sweep of the skirts of the mountains gentle here, on the right the softly

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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murmuring sea. Tomb and church stand on a promontory which is indeed the southern spur of the bay of Matavai, and I have never seen them other than remote and still. Around the grave grow iron-wood trees or casuarinas, than which there is no more lovely tree in the Pacific. It is a species of pine, with long green-grey needles, and every smallest breeze sighs in its branches. Thus there is weeping for ever around Pomare V. But not of men. None come here that I know. Already creepers hide the foreign escutcheon and the great initial P ; already there are cracks in the masonry. Behind is the railed pit in which was buried his furniture and effects, and they say the vengeance for a touch is leprosy. It has fallen in and the rail is decaying, but truly no one touches. No one cares. Only, as one stands on the deserted shore, the great peace of sea and sky and mountain broods over all.

The tragedy is not less because there is not really anything visible to move one at all. I have known tourists bored and disappointed. The very monument is hideously European and Protestant of its day. He whom it commemorates



[W. Crane, Tahiti.]

A casuarina tree.

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## The Passing of a People

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cut a sorry figure on life's stage. But that it should be so, that this should be the last of a line of sea-kings as daring as the Vikings, as heroic as the chiefs of Troy, that is the tragedy. For make no dispute, this is the grave of a people too fine, too simple, too beauty-worshipping for our civilisation, too religious for our religion. Like a child with a beautiful complex toy, we broke them with our hands. Pomare's tomb is the record of our shame.

Let me write it first and last, there is no Polynesian people left of the Tahitian branch. The blood is mixed fantastically, and some of the characteristics crop up in individuals, but the half-castes of modern Tahiti, and even the survivors of purer blood, bear no more resemblance to their great ancestors than the modern Greeks do to Achilles, Agamemnon and Odysseus. The beauty of Tahiti is the beauty of an exquisite shell. You may love, moreover, a certain free happy atmosphere which still obtains like a wraith of the past, and you may perhaps feel, on her shores and in her valleys, the breath of a spirit that lingers yet. But the race has passed away. For a little

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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only do we arrest at all the feet of Time. How far we are to blame and on which chiefly of many influences the guilt should fall, is another story, just as the death of the race may be held to be inevitable. But neither the one nor the other alters the fact. Confronted by the achievements of our age, there must surely be a gesture made towards this monument, and towards others like it strewn across the world, by whatever gods there be.



CHAPTER III

THE "BOUNTY" AND THE "DUFF"



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## The “Bounty” and the “Duff”

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### CHAPTER III

#### THE “BOUNTY” AND THE “DUFF”

THE whole of the first district out of Papeete, Arue, has for its sea-coast a bay, called by the first comers Matavai, which is perhaps the most historic and interesting in Tahiti. It was discovered by Captain Wallis in 1767, visited by Cook in 1769, the anchorage of Captain Bligh with the *Bounty* for six months in 1788, and of others subsequently until Captain Wilson, who brought the first missionaries in 1797 in that historic ship the *Duff*. Almost exactly twenty years later, still completely unchanged in appearance, Matavai saw the arrival of William Ellis of the London Missionary Society, whose book, *Polynesian*

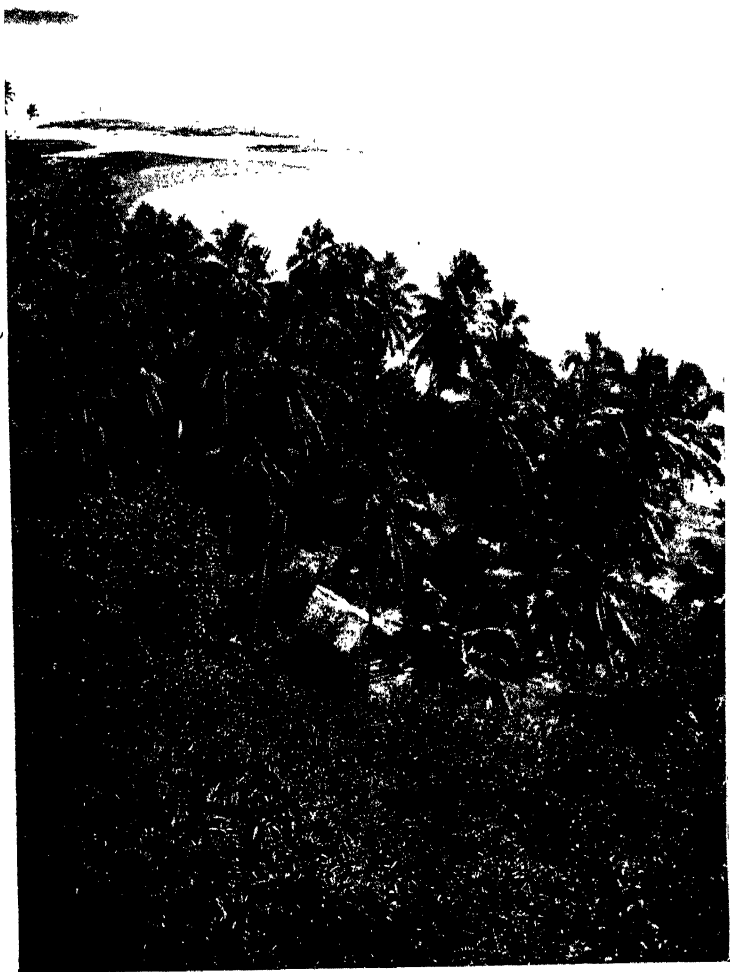
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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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*Researches*, is well worth a little of our time. Ellis had waited five months in Sydney, after a voyage from England of six, for a "conveyance" to the Society Islands, and then had taken three more to reach his destination. He writes picturesquely :

"Although the scene before me was now one of loveliness and quietude, cheerful, yet placid as the smooth waters of the bay, that scarcely rippled by the vessel's side, it has often worn a very different aspect. Here the first missionaries frequently heard the song accompanying the licentious areois dance, the deafening noise of idol worship, and saw the human victim carried by for sacrifice ; here, too, they often heard the startling cry of war, and saw their frightened neighbours fly before the murderous spear and plundering hand of lawless power. The invaders' torch reduced the native hut to ashes, while the lurid flame seared the green foliage of the trees, and clouds of smoke, rising up among their groves, darkened for a time surrounding objects. On such occasions, and they were not infrequent, the contrast between the country, and the inhabitants, must have been most affecting, appearing as



“As fair a prospect as the heart of man can devise.”

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## The "Bounty" and the "Duff"

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if the demons of darkness had lighted up infernal fires, even in the bowers of paradise.

"Within sight of the spot where our vessel lay, four of the missionaries were stripped and maltreated by the natives, two of them nearly assassinated from the anger of the king, and one of them was murdered. Here the first missionary dwelling was erected, the first temple for the worship of Jehovah reared, and the first missionary grave opened ; and here, after having been obliged to convert their house into a garrison and watch night and day in constant expectation of attack, the missionaries were obliged, almost in hopeless despair, to abandon a field on which they had bestowed the toil and culture of twelve anxious and eventful years."

The periods of Mr. Ellis are too good to miss and it is a pity that we cannot have more of him, but the accuracy of the missionary is another story. Here, in Matavai to-day, one can but wonder a little. As one continues to read, for example, Mr. Ellis's own ingenuous account of the first missionary band, one is surprised to find that within two years one of their own number had

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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been deprived of communion for preferring native to Christian life, despite the terrifying horrors of the description given above, and within further two years, another, "an intelligent, active young man, twenty-four years of age, having acquired a tolerable knowledge of the language in which he was to preach to the heathen . . . fell into open iniquity and embraced a gloomy state of infidelity." Of his "open iniquity," however, Mr. Ellis can himself speak. "He intimated his doubts as to the reality of Divine influence on the mind . . . declared his sentiments to be deistical . . . and lived some time with a native female as his wife." If Mr. Ellis could have foreseen how many of the future white inhabitants of Tahiti would "embrace" a like "gloomy state," his reflections would have been sad indeed.

It is, of course, extraordinarily difficult to get at the truth of those days. It is none the less interesting to try. If, for example, we take up the matter of population and the causes of its decay, we find the missionary evidence very difficult. Thus, discussing it, Mr. Ellis quotes Tati, the famous chief of Papara in Tahiti, as

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## The "Bounty" and the "Duff"

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saying : " If God had not sent His word at the time He did, wars, infanticide, human sacrifices etc., would have made an end of the small remnant of the nation." That was in 1815, almost fifty years after the discovery of the islands. Now within two pages Mr. Ellis is himself telling us of the introduction of disease, especially venereal, and writing : " the maladies originally prevailing among them, appear, compared with those by which they are now afflicted, to have been few in number and mild in character " ; of the terrible effects of the use of gunpowder which Pomare first obtained from the mutineers of the *Bounty* and of the " demoralisation, crimes and misery " which followed the teaching to the Tahitians of " the art of distillation " and the importation of " ardent spirits " among a people whose only previous intoxicant had been " sedative rather than inebriating," " tabued for the chiefs " and " strictly prohibited " to the common people. He then adds :

" These (three) causes operating upon a people, whose simple habits of diet rendered their constitutions remarkably susceptible of violent im-



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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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pressions, are, to a reflecting mind, quite sufficient to account for the rapid depopulation of the islands within the last fifty or sixty years." Or again : " The depopulation since their discovery may be easily accounted for thus."

Now the missionaries cannot have it both ways. Halving Captain Cook's possibly exaggerated statement, when Tahiti was discovered it carried, under heathenism, 100,000 inhabitants. After the fifty years which saw the introduction of venereal disease, gunpowder and alcohol, Mr. Ellis reckoned 10,000. Publishing his book in 1829 he wrote : " The philanthropist will rejoice to know, that although sixteen years ago the nation appeared on the verge of extinction, it is now, under the renovating and genial principles of true religion, and the morality with which this is inseparably connected, rapidly increasing." Alas for the " philanthropist " of the early Victorian period ! Tahiti has been Christian for a century, and to-day, if it can boast even as many as 10,000 inhabitants as a round number, I doubt if there are 500 of the old pure Tahitian blood. If the Chinese and Europeans and half-castes withdrew, Tahiti might

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## The "Bounty" and the "Duff"

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fairly be reckoned, for the most part, an uninhabited island.

But on the shores of Arue, with these two naïve old missionary volumes before us, it is not so hard after all to arrive at the truth. First, unquestionably, it is not fair to lay to the charge of religion the total ruin of Polynesia, either then or later. Western disease, alcohol and gunpowder began it, and Western commercialism has concluded it. Eliminate the first three causes, is it even the missionary who is most eager to convert the native to print dresses, corrugated iron and bully beef? If never a deluded and benighted missionary had landed these things would have come, and have come backed by battleships. And Mr. Ellis and his friends were at least disinterested, generous, devoted. There are blackguard missionaries, and, perhaps there are noble, altruistic, self-sacrificing traders. Which are, or have been, the more common, "to a reflecting mind" as Mr. Ellis would say, judge ye.

But the pitiful story of the convinced and often heroic nineteenth century missionary is set before us here, while we linger on the beach of

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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Arue, with all its pathos. He landed to save a race from his own countrymen and from a religious and social state which he did not understand, convinced that Victorian England was God's own country. To the Tahitians he was an angel of light by comparison with the drunken sailor, the rum-merchant and the black-birder, and he was a magician to boot with his books and bells and harmoniums, his planes and chisels and gimlets, his frock-coats and top hats. With his drugs too, and his surgical implements. On the whole he had a fair field, and he did his best with it according to the light within him. The better class of traveller, sea captain and trader applauded him ; he basked in the smile of royal approval ; his country's Parliament willingly voted warships to support him. And what did he do ? Ask Mr. Ellis.

Mr. Ellis found no less than thirty persons of both sexes sleeping on clean mats side by side in airy bamboo houses through which passed without hindrance the fresh air of heaven. Moreover, they had but a sleeping cloth about the loins each, and no nightgowns or pyjamas. Conceive



*]W. Crake, Tahiti.*

The beach of Arue.

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## The "Bounty" and the "Duff"

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what Queen Victoria would have said to that ! The good missionary wrote his horror in his diary, and got to work. In a few years Captain Gambier, of H.M.S. *Dauntless*, on "passing the reef of coral which formed the harbour," was kept "silent for some moments" with "astonishment and delight" until he burst into "unqualified approbation" at the scene before him. "In every direction, white cottages, precisely English, were seen peeping from among the rich foliage." The Queen received him in her "neat cottage," furnished with "sofa with backs and arms," "curtains to the windows of white cloth" giving "a cheerful and comfortable air to the rooms." "The bedrooms were upstairs, and were perfectly clean and neat." Here, "since the introduction of Christianity, the use of flowers in the hair and fragrant oil has been in a great degree discontinued, . . . partly from the introduction of European caps and bonnets, the latter being now universally worn." Here "the females, no longer exposed to that humiliating neglect to which idolatry had subjected them, enjoyed the comforts of domestic life, the pleasure resulting from the culture of their minds,

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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the ability to read the Scriptures and to write in their own language." Even more : " Until their reception of Christianity, (the females) considered it degrading to attach themselves to the household of the foreigners, . . . thought their own manner of wearing a piece of cloth cast loosely round the body preferable to the European mode of dress, and consequently had no inducement to learn needlework or any other kind of female employment." But now they were " taught to work at their needle, and soon made a pleasing proficiency." In short had Queen Victoria been able to drive around among the villagers of the island as at Balmoral she would have found the Polynesia of Mr. Ellis almost as Christian as Scotland. In a little the Prince Consort could have crowned his work with an exhibition.

To my mind that is literally the whole truth about this great question, and it must be remembered that there are people left who would do all over again what Mr. Ellis and his friends did. Conceive of him as a man utterly convinced that all persons were going to hell who did not accept the Christian gospel, and that outside the Christian

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## The "Bounty" and the "Duff"

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church the whole world lay in the Evil One—and a horrible Evil One at that. Throw in complete ignorance of the true condition of the islanders and a willingness to believe the worst. Add, lastly, that his own wife at home would have considered it immodest—and therefore wicked—to bathe in the sea at Brighton except apart from her husband and in a thick bathing gown from chin to heels, and you have finished with Mr. Ellis as easily as Mr. Ellis finished with the Tahitians.

From the point of view of the average man to-day it is a thousand pities that the Tahitians did not convert Mr. Ellis. The strictly Polynesian section of the race was of great beauty and size and no darker than sun-burnt Europeans. They were in perfect health, poverty was unknown among them, and if the world could get back to their system of economics it would be worth a dozen Great Wars and the extinction of nine-tenths of us. They believed in a Supreme Deity and in the strict sense of the word they had no idolatry, since they only made images of lesser powers which were venerated solely as dwelling-places, possibly temporary, of the spirit. Religion

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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entered, unfortunately for them, into everything they did—amusements, boat-building, fishing and the like—and in consequence the new Faith was made to destroy or change every old practice of their society. They were monogamous and moral, but they did not tie marriage to a life-long vow nor regard sexuality as an unclean thing. They were never cannibals in Tahiti. War, before the coming of white men, was a chivalrous, homeric thing, consisting chiefly of personal combats. They loved children to an extent that no Western race has ever approached, and the practice of infanticide—performed immediately on birth, as mercifully as possible, with tears in the eyes, as even Mr. Ellis admits—was but their method of combating the blind fecundity of that bloody hag Nature, whom, by the same token, the ignorant missionaries adored. And it was because they knew the truth about her that they considered occasional human sacrifice, again performed as mercifully as possible, her inevitable demand.

Enough. One might go on for ever. It is no wonder that to De Bougainville, Wallis and Cook Tahiti seemed a fairy tale. They came from





[Paul Engdahl.]

Tahitian Fishers.

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## The "Bounty" and the "Duff"

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Christendom and compared with that it was. To the sailor of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it seemed more—a Paradisical wedding feast to which one could enter without a wedding garment. Again, alas, it was. And to the Calvinist everything about it had to be devilish, or else his fundamental doctrine of the entire depravity and condemnation of the world would have gone by the board. There has been no greater tragedy in the history of our civilisation.

The graves of two devoted missionaries lie overgrown and hidden among the tangled grass and foreign weeds on the edge of the bush at Arue. Standing near them there "peep from among the rich foliage" of the once populous bay of Matavai the following buildings in irregular order: a lighthouse, the hut of a half-caste afflicted with elephantiasis, a Chinese store, the charming bungalow of a European who allows us to enjoy the wonderful surf and the use of his bathing-room and shower, a Protestant temple and the grave of the last Polynesian king, Pomare V. Otherwise it is still what Mr. Ellis found it: a beautiful open bay, screened from the prevailing trade winds

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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but exposed to a considerable swell from the sea. Watching the gay crowd of coloured folk on a Sunday who come here to enjoy that swell and who break the long solitude of the week, I dream my dreams. I can see the *Bounty* afloat in the Bay ; I can see Captain Cook taking the queen to his arms on the shore ; I can see the gospel ship rounding the headland. I would rather that I could see a fleet of even war canoes sweeping out to sea. But even so I would fence from weeds and dogs the graves of those missionaries.

CHAPTER IV  
**THE DESERTED VALLEY**



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## The Deserted Valley

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### CHAPTER IV

#### THE DESERTED VALLEY

As has been said, the newcomer's first impression of Tahiti is of mountains climbing gently but irresistibly into the soft Cambridge blue of Pacific skies. Steaming up the channel between Moorea and Tahiti from Australia, Moorea is fantastic, jagged, sharp, as likely as not only wreathed with mist, but Tahiti's long swelling slopes descend almost always to the fringe of flat land (studded with coconuts) from masses of thick cloud. Most mornings I am out on the reef before the sun lights upon it in order that I may look up at those slopes. From the distance of a mile or so they seem smooth green ridged undulations inviting

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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the climber. The trees mount but a little way. Thereafter there are perhaps a few isolated casuarinas, palms, guavas, sycamores, but soon enough the long gentle slopes.

When the clouds lift, rugged peaks are seen to thrust scarred heads above, all of them unconquered ; and whether they lift or not the slopes are broken with great gashes as if some giant hand had torn down the mountain side with immense crooked fingers. Down each such gash a river foams to the sea, fed perpetually by the rains on high. Along the level you cross some stream or another every few hundred yards, and every mile or so a stream big enough to be called a river. It is by these river-valleys that the interior can alone be reached. There are no other roads. By the side of some, small paths run up towards the mountains for a few kilometres, but then, if not before, you must take to the very water-course if you would make any further progress. Except where the water has thus cut its way, the tropical vegetation is a thick wall. Even if a path be cut through it literally, with knife and axe, on emerging from the brush one is no better off. For the

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## The Deserted Valley

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smooth green slopes are in reality interlaced thickets of fern, breast or shoulder high, which cover treacherous lava-rock, razor sharp or pot-holed.

It has not always been so. The fringe of cultivated land is now a battlefield where the farmer must do perpetual strife with lantana and other weeds, and it is these weeds that have knit the river-valleys so inextricably. Yet but a few years ago Tahiti must have seemed to have escaped the curse of Eden after the Fall. There were no weeds. It seems incredible, but there are natives still living who can remember when the grass was a green sward beneath the coconut trees and the valleys almost free from really noxious plants. Just so there are still no snakes and practically no harmful insects. Unlike Africa or other tropical lands, a man can walk in safety from that sort of thing over the mountain slopes. Or he would be able to do so if he could walk at all.

In those days, then, the valleys were inhabited. There were mountain villages, there were heathen high places of the old gods, there were roads across the island. The population was then ten times



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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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its present size. Also it was native. Now it is half-caste, Chinese or white ; now it clusters about the motor-road ; now the wall of the Garden is broken down and the angels have sheathed their swords.

Of such great valleys the first is, undoubtedly, that of Papenoo. We have been lingering at Arue, but, taking to the road again, we are heading direct for Papenoo. There is, first, the only hill of any size up which a road runs in the island to be negotiated, a steep ascent from the top of which you can turn back and view as fair a prospect as the heart of man can devise. Below you the coconut woods are cleared about a small native house of the old style, the sea foams in the teeth of the coral, and, a cloud on the horizon, Moorea swims at her lovely ease. Inland there is the vast sweep of the mountains which we are going this day to attempt to penetrate, and, far out in the middle distance, a pencil of low land on guard before Papeete herself.

But climb this hill of Haapape. Beyond, on the left now, Point Venus can be seen. A few kilometres further on there is a branch road leading



“ The sea-coast becomes arrestingly beautiful.”

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## The Deserted Valley

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to the lighthouse and to the unpretentious and not uninteresting monument which the great navigator set up after taking the transit of Venus for the Royal Society whose name has been given to the entire group. Cook was a man to honour indeed, despite everything. If they had all been Cooks who landed in Tahiti the island might have been spared the worst of its ills. But Cook unlocked a door whose key he could not keep, and—well, we will not go down to the monument. Any guide book or encyclopedia will take you there. I want you in the Desolate Valley.

On then. The sea-coast becomes arrestingly beautiful in a mile or so. The charm of Tahiti is its variety, and here you will see what you little expect. There is no reef. Through storm-tossed and twisted casuarinas you can look down to an iron-girt coast where the waves break in fury in the trades. It is reminiscent of Brittany or Cornwall. Block out the palms and come here on some day of high wind and overcast sky, and you will see the rollers thunder in from the Pacific as they do more familiarly from the Atlantic. And perhaps that the little leper settlement is on this

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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stretch of road is a thing not without its significance. If one of Nature's harsh and bitter laws had caught me up and thrown me down to die a crushed and broken thing, I would rather be able to crawl to some spot from which I could see her insensate fury than her smile.

At fifteen or sixteen kilometres the houses begin to cluster more thickly and you are at Papenoo. It might almost be a village. Here indeed lingers a good deal of national feeling, for the road ceases just beyond at the river and Papenoo stands as it were on guard before the remoter and less visited districts of Tiarei and Mahaena. Moreover this is the mouth of the great valley which, in earlier days, was as populous and fertile as the Weald of Kent. From the bridge you can see that there is a highway to the heart of the island. The very river itself rises nearer the southern than the northern shore on which we stand, one feed indeed is Lake Vaihiria which lies, little more than a big pool, on the crest of the mountains that frown over Papara and Papeari. A rough track will allow progress for a little way and at first there are plantations and



"A highway to the heart of the island."

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## The Deserted Valley

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clearings. They soon cease. The ground rises and the walls of the river close in. You can glimpse Orohena that we saw behind Pierre Loti's pool, upon the right, but you cannot easily reach the great valley or plain of Papenoo which lies beneath its shade. Ten miles long and a mile and more wide it was once the centre of the native civilisation. Now you would be resolute to do more than look down upon it. All is overgrown by a wild tangle of weed and bush and only the tropic bird which sails on white wing above knows what is there.

Mount Orohena is almost in the middle of the main island and the pivot from which this and other valleys run down. It rises from a central plateau which I have tried hard to reach. If you imagine yourself entering here and reaching the mountain, then a sharp turn at right angles to the right would bring you down the valley of the Punaruu to the sea as this of the Papenoo took you up. A kilometre from my house on the west coast was this Punaruu river, one of the biggest and most historically important in the island. From the bridge that crosses it in the flats there one looks up to see Mount Aorai and the Diadem behind which Orohena hides—all three

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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untrodden by the foot of man, jagged and serene, and it was from this point of entry that I tried to reach the centre uplands. Moreover up this valley of the Punaruu is the ruin of the chief *marae* in Tahiti, a *marae* being the heathen temple of the old days. It was nothing more or less than the high place of the Old Testament. A hundred years ago the old gods were destroyed by order and the native officially converted. About the same time the weeds were introduced. The high places were left to the birds. But not even that for long, for the birds themselves have not been left to the high places.

Nevertheless, with the river so near I determined to explore by this route. I thought that I would at least see for myself all that there was to see, and perhaps start some wing of scarlet or gold that yet lingered undisturbed. I got up very early and set off with a haversack and a stout stick. Oldest trousers and oldest shoes too, for both would be destroyed, camera, a bush-knife and great expectations. The sun was not yet on the water when I took to the little path.

For five kilometres the way was easy, or



“A heathen temple of the old days.”

[W. Crane, Tahiti.



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## The Deserted Valley

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comparatively so. A half-caste Frenchman, with more pluck than most, has a hut that distance up the stream where he rears pigs in semi-savagery and grows bananas and papais. He has cut a path to his hut, which remains clear, for his house proper is on the road within reach of motors, and he rides on horseback most days to his plantation, returning in the evening. Even so thorns tear at one's legs, oozy mud slushes over one's shoes, and growths of tropic plants reach over to snatch at one's head. Also three times in five kilometres of made path must one wade waist deep across the torrential river sown with boulders.

Still it was lovely. Down the valley, seawards, Moorea swam on the placid ocean like the dream island that she is, and up it the big peaks waited to-day unwrapped. If it was hot in that green tunnel, at least the river murmured a few yards away all the time and at this time of the year Tahiti is fresh in the early hours. I picked a ripe guava or two as I walked. I pulled the wild ginger and bruised the root for the fragrant smell. I twined some wild-flowering creeper round my hat, and I sang as I went.

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My friend was not in his hut ; it was not his day for work. The first living thing to greet me was one of the pigs drinking at the last crossing below his place, and the others of his herd were the last, if you except the fish and the flies. No, I forget : he also keeps fowls. I sat for awhile in his rough shack to enjoy their companionship, and then I plunged into the unknown.

I struggled on for three hours. The river wound in and out, under rocky precipices up which one stared at perhaps one ragged coconut outlined against the sky at the top and through gullies where one had to choose the side one should take with care and sometimes had practically to swim. At times it flowed by level banks so matted with jungle as scarce to afford a landing-place. The water was clear as the air, cool, delicious. In places it foamed and roared down a rapid or waterfall into a deep pool whose bottom I could not make with a dive. Everywhere there were fish, multi-coloured as those of the reef and sea. Green and blue and orange, they slipped away to join the bigger grey brethren when I approached. Shrimps lurked under the stones. In one place of horror

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## The Deserted Valley

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there were millions of drowned centipedes, the small brown variety it is true, but covering the stones for yards, satiating the fish.

But there was never a bird, never an animal, never a human being or the remotest sign of one. This valley used to be full of swarms of gemmed parakeets, of great grey wood-pigeons, of small green and maroon doves, of long-tailed cuckoos, and of the lovely little native kingfishers flashing up the stream. You can read of them in Hermann Melville's books authentically, and elsewhere, because most modern Tahiti tales are vivid in imagination. That is the best word. It avoids libel actions.

Well, there is not one left. Maina birds, introduced by the Government in a mad scheme for the destruction of insects, and chicken hawks later to destroy the maina birds, have massacred the lot. Now the hawks eat chickens and the maina birds fruit in the sea belt. And Western cats fatten on maina birds. Only the blue heron, the wild duck, and the white frigate birds still defy fate along the more inaccessible shores, and these the sporting Frenchman thins as quickly as he can.

So, at long last, I followed a turn which brought

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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me to the head-waters of the river proper. A long reach lies placid and dreaming at the foot of the central plateau, and into it trickle half a dozen small and one bigger main stream from the heights above. I had slowly climbed perhaps a thousand feet. Now however I must do a couple of thousand more at a tremendous gradient. I sought vainly for any pretence of an opening in the living wall. I was not a bird to fly up the water-fall and it was so long since the last native of any sort on any errand had been here that I could not see where to begin. At last I plunged into the tangle—and made perhaps a hundred yards in three-quarters of an hour. But I was glad of that. I emerged on an island point of rock, swimming in thick impenetrable seas of green, but from it I could see a far off glimpse of the sea, and above, on the edge of the plateau, the black rocks of the *marae*.

They were tumbled and fallen. I should not have known them for human work if I had not been told what to expect. Creepers of the forest had wrapped them round, living plants smashed and split them. I sat down. Below arose a faint murmur of water, but otherwise there was



“ The sunlight fell on utter loveliness of rock and tree and fern.”

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## The Deserted Valley

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no sound. The sunlight fell on utter loveliness of rock and tree and fern, but nothing stirred of itself, nothing had conscious life. From a peak high overhead there stretched a faint scarf of mist and as one watched it grew and moved. Slowly, silently, mysteriously, it reached out towards the valley and my island rock. You listened for it as it were, but like death and time there was no sound. I knew that I must go.

A century and less ago the strolling players of the *Arioi* made these rocks ring with song and dance, not so greatly otherwise than the Bacchantes of ancient Greece ; and if, to our seeming, heathen and perhaps cruel, at least they met a native need in a natural way. I thought how the Tahitians of those days came moreover as nearly to the simple communal primitive life as ever man has come. They loved beauty, they worshipped mystery, they made brotherhood a reality. Nymph and satyr lived in these brakes, with the high gods friendly over all. Pan played his pipes among the reeds. The Western sailor, from Captain Cook downwards, found here a Paradise. But he entered as the devil entered Eden. He brought

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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venereal disease, alcohol, commercial greed and the standards of Western individualism. He was followed by the Bible and print dresses. And in their wake came the tourist steamers, gramophones, motor-cars, tinned foods and officials. And I.

I at least am ashamed. I at least am sorry. I at least am glad that the valley is given over to desolation, that the birds have fled and that the true Polynesian people of Tahiti have not survived to shame.

**CHAPTER V**  
**THE SOUL OF POLYNESIA**



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## The Soul of Polynesia

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### CHAPTER V

#### THE SOUL OF POLYNESIA

It would be difficult to say which is the more lovely, the road north of Papeete or the road south. North, as we have seen, the traveller has the beauty of the Diadem as one views it from the valley of Fautaua, a lovely sweep of mountain country between the fourth and fifth kilometres, the bay of Arue proper with the tomb of Pomare, the hill of Haapape, the descent to the approach to Point Venus, the stretch of rocky casuarina-girt coast beyond, and at last the great river and valley of Papenoo. In imagination we have gone up it to the interior, skirted Mount Orohena and come out to the west by the valley of the Punaruu, the 'Deserted Valley.' But it was only

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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in imagination, and to few is given opportunity to turn imagination into fact. Most of us must perforce take the south road out of the little town, holding on through Faaa until we hit the Punaruu in the district of Punaauia.

It is a lovely road and full of memories. We run along the edge of Papeete bay and look back at the clustering houses, the wharves, the schooners and the ship-yards, all nestling at the foot of the hills. With luck there will be no mail steamer in the harbour, but maybe some white-winged island craft driving in from the Paumotus or the Marquesas, laden visibly with nothing more romantic than copra, but with a packet of pearls in the super-cargo's cabin. Anyway, we mount a little rise quickly enough and swing round a corner that blots Papeete out. I am never sorry. Pause a little and look at the new view, earnest of how much more to come !

At sea, shimmering in the heat of the sun, lies Moorea, the Moorea which one wise man of my acquaintance refused ever to visit for he said that to tread her veritable shore would be to dispel the magic of a dream. He was right, for Moorea is one of the most perfect of all the South Sea islands.

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## The Soul of Polynesia

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I am myself jealous for the honour of Tahiti, which, I hold, has to offer all of Moorea and more—jealous, for so many tourists scarce get beyond Papeete, but take the schooner to Moorea, find easy provision of all island delights, and say that Tahiti cannot equal them. But the proper function of Moorea is doubtless that of providing a lovely view for Tahiti, and all along this western coast we shall glimpse her again and again, fantastic and mirage-like in the sunlight, unearthly in the radiance of the moon, dark, aloof and a mystery as the sun dies behind her.

At your feet is a shallow bay and every imaginable shade of blue and grey will be painted on the water there. The coconuts crowd down to the water's edge in serried ranks, not stragglers but battalions. You can make up your mind about coconuts here. The leaders fly banners and streamers in the wind, and the rest sway and rustle and rock themselves in it. Yellow-green and brown they are, and brown the clustering nuts. There are islands where all that the earth has to give are coconuts, and they suffice—or sufficed—for timber, roofing, table and kitchen utensils, food, drink and money. For beauty too, for of

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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earth's lovely sights one of the loveliest can be a strip of coral shore, sea and cloud and wind—and coconuts. They say that in such a place from the very wisdom of Solomon there can be escape, for one can come to cease from study and the making of books can have an end. Doubtless for that reason the many makers of them who have travelled this road have been so loud in their praises of the districts which this view opens up.

For they have been many. We are travelling now in the footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson, of Jack London, of Rupert Brooke, of Douglas Calderon, to make no mention of living writers. Where they have stayed on the road to the south we too shall stay, but none rested in this district of Faaa. I do not know that I care for most of it myself. Beautiful as the road itself is, the district is too near to Papeete. But where it ends, by the sign that tells you so, a little path leads up the hill on the right. If you have the permission of the owner you should certainly ascend, for he has a house on the hill-top which is easily the best site in the whole of the east and north and west of Tahiti. From his verandah Moorea is seen out at sea in all her best and loveliest, the corals of the

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## The Soul of Polynesia

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sea-bed glow in the refracted light through the water, the mountains of the interior sweep and roll away through Punaauia and Paea, and the strand is just kissed beneath the coconuts by the tiny ripples of the lagoon. He is a great fellow too, and a man of memories, and maybe he will talk of London or of Brooke while he mixes the best rum-punch in the island and you look at the view. But on.

The next district, then, is Punaauia, and the photograph of the coast-line taken from the reef, which here is broken by the Punaruu river and at one little point swings in to the land, shows the greater part of it. It gives perhaps as good an impression as could be obtained of the type of country that prevails down the whole of this side of Tahiti. The great hills descend to the sea in green undulating folds broken by deep valleys through which little streams have torn a way. For the depth of about a mile there is a belt of lower land consisting mainly of coconut plantations intermixed with every other description of tropical tree and shrub. Where the cleared plantations cease the bush begins, so thick and thorny as to be almost impenetrable, while up the valleys of the smaller

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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streams are groves of heavily shaded *mape* ever fragrant and ever cool.

In the very centre of this sweep of coast, at a little point that here juts out towards the reef, bounded by a brook and looking to the south end of Moorea, dwelt Paul Gauguin from 1895 to 1901. It was his final abandonment of Europe, following his second failure to obtain recognition of his art in France. The greater part of the house still stands, but in itself it is not beautiful. Its situation, however, could hardly be improved. On either side the bay falls back so that Gauguin looked left to the mouth of the Panaruu and right to a point of delicate iron-wood trees or casuarinas. But before him the sun set daily in that wonderful Pacific glory of delicate colour upon feathery cloud, in the summer right out to sea and in the winter over Moorea. Since the reef is broken just here also, not only had he the everlasting murmur of the ocean upon it, but to one side is an open ocean beach upon which the great breakers thunder in the south-east trades. Away from the road, its occasional traffic did not disturb him, and there adjoins his property the estate of a Frenchman who was his greatest friend in the island.



The view from Gauguin's house.

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## The Soul of Polynesia

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Still living in a little native house across the stream is his *vahine*, the nude in his picture entitled "Nevermore," but in Papeete he is mainly known as the painter in connection with whom the world without, incomprehensibly to the bourgeois population of the island, played upon them the most annoying trick of the century. It neglected him even as they during his life, but now that he is dead it would pay them a fortune for one of the carvings or the paintings that they refused to buy for a score of francs in the open market at the auction which followed his death. The purchaser of his property made a bonfire of 'rubbish' which to-day would make him the richest man in Tahiti, while two young French officers picked up for one hundred and fifty francs a picture that changed hands the other day for eighty thousand.

The romance of his life provided Mr. Somerset Maugham with the substance of the story of James Strickland in "The Moon and Sixpence." But he was a Frenchman, his retreat in Tahiti was here in Punaauia and not at Tautira, he died in the Marquesas in 1903, and it was not leprosy that killed him. Nevertheless the book is true enough



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in spirit to his eccentric and arresting genius. A middle-aged and well-to-do stockbroker was indeed driven to abandon his wife and family and comfort in the pursuit of his art, and here in Punaauia he lived as a primitive among natives that were fast ceasing to be primitive any longer even in his day. For that reason he left Tahiti, hoping in the Marquesas that civilisation might yet be out-distanced. But its tentacles were even there and he felt the doom of their approach before, in battle with authority, lonely, and in agony, death brought to him that peace from the striving of his genius which the world could never give.

The story is really one of the most remarkable of our time. It is easy enough to blame a man for the desertion of his wife and family, especially when he leaves them no guaranteed existence, but Paul Gauguin's act was a 'gesture' upon which it is well to dwell. I have many a time sat by the stretch of shore along which he must often have wandered, and turned it over in my mind. Millions of us in these days find ourselves tied in some place at some job in which we know only too bitterly and well that something in us will never be fulfilled. We shall continue to live, we shall make a

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## The Soul of Polynesia

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reasonable income, we shall rear a family, we shall be increasingly knit about with human ties and responsibilities, and in the end we shall be neatly and respectably buried in a cemetery beneath a headstone distinguished from a thousand about precisely as much, and no more, as we were distinguished from the swarm in our life. And 'life' will be over. We shall have lived and died as millions more. We shall have had our trick at the wheel. And—will it have been worth while?

Can any say? The Christian Faith offers a consolation: "Faithful in a few things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." But is that enough? Does one believe that? Even from the point of view of orthodox religion, how do we know that circumstances against which perhaps we ought to have fought and an environment which possibly we ought to have broken did not cause us to bury a talent and lose a reward? And does orthodoxy mean much, anyway, to most of us? Do we honestly think that Divine Favour smiles on a modern life which to most of us, now and again at any rate, is made up of false standards, routine slavery and tinsel recreations?

We do not—that is the fact with the majority.

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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But we find ourselves too completely broken in before we have had time to think. The universal deduction from the Fifth Commandment, an early imprudent marriage, our children, the mob instinct, and our own cowed souls, these are the grave clothes of many a man long before he comes to the tomb. It is something that the most of us have breeding enough to shrug our shoulders and choke it down. If we did not, quite truly, our own world and the entire social fabric if our example were followed, would fall in ruins about us.

But here is a man who lifted his head to the brazen heaven and flung defiance back in answer to the silence of his mother's God. Here is a man who, even more bravely, rent to tatters the careful web of social custom and traditional duty and went out naked. Here is a man who weighed every respectability against some only half-articulate cry in his own soul and dared to see, in the white light of reality, that there was literally no balance at all. Say what you will, judge as you will, men have been acclaimed saints for less. Nor did he falter. He preferred, at the lowest ebb, to stick bills in a wintry Paris rather than barter the desire of his soul. Had he died there we would

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## The Soul of Polynesia

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never have known his story, but he would have passed over to heaven or hell at least with his head unbowed. As it was he came here. He was no moral Hercules. He was not even particularly wise. He did not find perfect peace or even satisfaction. Does anyone anywhere? And in the long run Nature had her way with his tormented body and struggling soul. He was clubbed under. But at least no Paris tombstone records the earthly resting-place of still another infinitesimal cog in the wheel who died respected and lamented, R.I.P. Somewhere in the infinite void Paul Gauguin knows that he escaped that badge. He preferred union with the Soul of Polynesia.

His neighbour here, who knew him so well, can recount for us the authentic story of his manner of life, take it as you will. He would come across in the morning to find the painter at his easel in his open-air studio under the pandanus-thatched roof, naked as likely as not, bearded, smoking innumerable cigarettes, engrossed in painting and unapproachable. They were old cronies by now, and Gauguin would merely throw him a monosyllable and continue to paint while he sat down to watch. Or the artist would be making his strange carvings

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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after the native manner, of incredible gods and austere nude humans and distorted twisted trees. Or he would be racked with pain and unable to work, in such moods brooding over the world's lack of recognition, the delayed or missing mails, the shortage of francs which might cheat him of paint and canvas or tobacco. He would dash off one of those grim letters, the expression of such a mood, which taken together and read without understanding, give so untrue an impression of the great man's life.

For his old neighbour knew the other side of his nature. There were days when they two would go off together down the road to a Frenchman who cooked superbly the "omelette baveuse" that the exiles' soul loved. There were times when he would show his friend that faded photograph of his children which they found among his few possessions at his death. And lastly there were occasions when they would remember together, that far off native land of France which Gauguin never forgot, for the last picture which he painted, among the vivid hues and under the blazing sun of the Marquesas, was of the roofs of a Breton village huddling under snow.

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## The Soul of Polynesia

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But Paul Gauguin came to Punaauia to absorb and to reproduce the spirit of primitive art, and 'the gods were dead' or dying when he came. The truly native song and dance and decoration had ceased or was ceasing to be. It had been, in the old days, spontaneous, instinctive, natural. There had been about it a primitive inspiration. Child of resplendent colour, of dominant nature, of rich imagination, the Polynesian had been that supreme living art that Gauguin's soul sought and that he would give his life to represent. But it was vanishing like a morning mist before the artificialities of the Law and the Prophets—before the French Republic and the Christian Church. The savage was bludgeoned from it, the beauty prostituted, the imagination laughed out of court. Furiously, desperately, Paul Gauguin fought here against the irresistible approach of these old enemies of untrammelled art. His fury betrayed him into follies, his despair into bitter words. All that was in vain, as it must be in vain. There is no return. It is for the artist to convert the new into more lovely channels, not to attempt to dam it and reassert the old, for the new has in it more of material power and knowledge and these are the

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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gods men worship. There is a pathetic little story, nothing in itself, which is a parable of Gauguin's failure that he himself could not read. He returned one day from Papeete, triumphant : he had heard that in the Marquesas you could still buy a girl model for a handful of sweets ! He ordered a sackful, and left Punaauia, with that honied 'trade,' for the last corner of the old gods' realm. There, at least, as even the unfriendly witness testifies, he would to the end 'forget his pain in speaking of his art.'

That his art is peculiarly difficult for a layman to understand cannot be gainsaid. He made, of course, no effort whatever to reproduce 'nature,' even although he made no actual *effort*, like some moderns, to distort it. The picture that is in essence a coloured photograph is the picture still that the ordinary man prefers, and the picture that Gauguin painted is as unlike that as a picture can well be and remain a picture. But the master-artist does not *see* coloured photographs. His eye, or more truly his mind, sees something other than the play of light and shade, the range of colour, the intersection of outline that those who have not his eye or mind discern. He is concerned to pro-



The lagoon at Punaauia.



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## The Soul of Polynesia

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claim that marvel to a dull world which, having eyes, seems to him to see not. And precisely what the master-artist sees, that the world quite often does not want to see.

Paul Gauguin was a master-artist. He had the gift of extraordinary sight. But he was unique among even master-artists, for exactly what he saw, what he strove to paint, no other has seen or at least has painted. And of all visions his was one for which the modern world has least use. Look at the Gauguin pictures. The modern world does not want to see the lurking lovely-hideous devil in what it delights to call 'dear Mother nature.' It does not want to see men and women stripped naked not only of clothes but of the conventional trivialities of mind and soul. And the fierce ascetic beauty that the master visioned even in and behind such things it cannot understand. Pilate and Herod agree together in the condemnation of this beauty, accused before them by the Chief Priests. Or so Paul Gauguin would have put it, so it seemed to him, and at least for that vision he endured a cross and despised a shame.

Was he happy here in Punaauia? Did he find the thing for which he made such sacrifices?

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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Would he, if he had spoken truly in the end, have regretted the decision that tore him from riches and family life and Paris, and stranded him here, sitting naked on his verandah with a native girl for wife and model ? Every man's decision depends on something in his own soul. Is the artist ever really happy ? Does he ever find the ideal ? Is he ever able to judge truly in the end ? But, very poorly of necessity, we have a last photograph of Paul Gauguin's island home, which, if there can be read into it the wonder of the sunset colours and the mystery and terror of the heavy tropic shadows, may itself make some answer to those questions. Taken where Gauguin must have sat hundreds of times as the sun went down, Moorea is bathed in the day's last ruddy light, which flowing across the water, turns to blood the mouth of the little stream that runs past the house and the slim palm trunks to pillars of night. All that earth has to offer of beauty cannot exceed such a scene as this. And this the master found night after night in the home of his adoption, supremely and nobly discontent.

CHAPTER VI  
**NARI, SON OF RARI**



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## Nari, Son of Rari

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### CHAPTER VI

#### NARI, SON OF RARI

" . . . A CORAL reef smoking in the white Pacific surges. Next, in the line of breakers, he made out a small canoe, an outrigger canoe. In the stern he saw a young bronzed god in scarlet hip-cloth dipping a flashing paddle. He recognised him. He was Nari, the youngest son of Rari, the chief, and this was Tahiti, and beyond that smoking reef lay the sweet land of Papara and the chief's grass house by the river's mouth. . . ." First published September 1909, only fourteen years ago. By Jack London.

I read the book in which that paragraph occurs for the first time not many kilometres from Nari's

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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own house, and it will serve to connect London with Tahiti. His early struggles and great success are too well known to need repetition, as is the story of his purchase of a schooner and his cruise in the Pacific. Honolulu or the more remote and savage groups of Western Pacific are more often associated with him, but "Martin Eden" is more than a mere story and this passage more than a passing reference. When success had come to Martin Eden, after long hard years, after every example of the false hollowness of modern life, and when success itself had proved but an apple of Sodom to him, then, in the last round of the battle, Martin remembers again a scene of his seafaring youth. He could see, as he sat brooding over the bitterness of his triumph, "a coral reef smoking in the white Pacific surges. . . ." There, then, "in the sweet land of Papara," he would seek a refuge with what was left to him of life. That he never reached it, that he preferred to slip from the port-hole of his state-room into the yet more still and restful Pacific depths, is the unexpectedly prophetic comment of the writer's hand.

Yet at least this first : Jack London has been



The Edge of the Lagoon.

[Paul Engdahl.

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## Nari, Son of Rari

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among the company who dreamed dreams of Tahiti. He was not actually here for long. In his own books, and still more in the books of his wife and friends about him, anyone who cares may obtain the exact facts and dates. I shall not. I prefer this dream picture. I want it to stand as he wrote it. I have read it in Papara, and Papara I know. I too, can dream dreams in Papara. But of what sort they are, hear ye.

The family from whom has descended Nari has been a great one in Tahiti. It has been bound up with the history of this branch of the Polynesian people for close on a thousand years; one might almost say it is their history. They alone have set out the story in a printed book, and all who know anything of the island know who they are. But this is not the chapter in which we shall try to see a little of that history, and for reasons of my own I have changed the name where Jack London did not. 'Nari' shall have the obscurity he would prefer with the ordinary reader; he cannot deny to others the inevitable consequences of his fame if so they desire. For myself I am honoured in calling myself his friend and he has been my host.



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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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I would not say one word to trouble him, but——  
Oh, but !—1909 ! The other day ! Is it possible ?

It is, and since in another fourteen years all will have ended, let me write the epitaph. I want to see it written, and I know that I can do it kindly. For that is all that there is left to do. Robert Louis Stevenson saw, fifty and not fourteen years ago, that he was only just in time in these islands, and wrote the tragic story of doom in "In the South Seas." A last chapter might be added to that account of a passing people, and if I can suggest its outline I shall be glad. It is an indictment of to-day of which there will be no trace to-morrow, and before to-morrow comes it should be done.

The coral reef, then, still smokes in Pacific surges no whit less white, and the land is there, though not as sweet with its imported weeds and its absence of birds. Papara is but a few miles south from Paul Gauguin's Punaauia. The river's mouth is there and Nari lives beside it as he did in London's day. He will come to meet you from the corrugated iron porch still blotched with ancient paint, and you will not at first notice the

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## Nari, Son of Rari

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iron for the purple gold-eyed glory of the immense bougainvillea that is stayed up to make a further porch beyond. He comes across a wide grassy stretch bordered with sweet-scented flowers and bushes, and you will forget awhile that your disreputable smelly noisy motor-car stands on the road behind you outside the Chinese store. The scarlet hip-cloth has been replaced by shirt and 'pants,' and the bronzed god is a middle-aged man with a drawn sad face. You will go in with him and he will be hospitable to the last degree if he is your friend. If you are not, he is still chief of the district in the room of Rari, and courteously at your service in accordance with Government regulations.

Rari died some while ago. He had been an old-time chief, who in his day had waged wars in Tahiti, acquired wide lands and kept open house. His memory as warrior, orator and statesman lingers. But his estates he knew not how to keep or leave or work after the Western manner, his eldest son died, and Nari inherited a decaying fortune. Bit by bit more and more has slipped away. Doubtless some misfortunes might have

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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been avoided, but lawyers and the new times and the Chinese and the rising incredible prices—Nari could not cope with these. He made an effort and married a princess from another island, a fine truly-native woman, and his eldest son might have inherited the tradition. But the epidemic that followed the war took them both four years ago, and broke the father's heart. He is a sick man too. What wonder if, in the passing of his house, there lurks a shadow in his eyes?

His face lights up as we talk. My American friend was as a son in the house when he was a boy, and they recall the father, the fishing in just such an outrigger canoe as that in "Martin Eden," the picnics up the river when Tahitian girls wore *pareus* and flowers, and the days care-free. He is now a successful business man and he yawns happily. "Let's have a drink, Nari, in memory of the old times," he says. Nari agrees. They laugh and drink, but over his emptying glass Nari's head sinks and the light dies again from his face.

He tells us that there is a cinema in the barn-like *himene* building to-night and we buy tickets

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## Nari, Son of Rari

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for the whole household and go. There is a biggish crowd gathered at the doors, and in the flares you can see their faces. A few, perhaps, look Tahitian, but mostly you can read the half-caste and the oriental. They are selling peeled oranges, Chinese pasties, the cooked chestnuts of the *mapi* tree and wreaths of *tiare tahiti*. "The Flower, of which we love faint and fading shadows here," sang Rupert Brooke—here? Go in. We sit on wooden benches, and the show begins in the middle of the fifth episode of "The Midnight Man." Also they have put in the film upside down so that the American sub-titles are not readable. Thank God they are not, and if I give you two which I wrote down on the spot, you will perhaps agree. "*Reggie, I'm starved. How about another nose-bag?*" "*Little Billy has found the key to Bald-pate.*" The Midnight Man wears a striped mask, holds up a ball with two revolvers, gives back the proceeds to the heroine, is thrown into a whirlpool under a modern fashionable house presumably in New York, and—— But the next episode is next week elsewhere. No matter. No, no matter indeed. But this is—"the coral reef

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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smoking in the white Pacific surges . . . the sweet land of Papara. . . .”

We sleep the following night at Neaa's. I like Neaa—N-e-a-a, please. He is perhaps more Tahitian than anyone else I know in Tahiti, and for that reason I am associating him with Rari, but for all that there is white blood in his veins. Also I suspect he is Tahitian because it is a good rôle, played well. God knows I do not say that unkindly, for Neaa has always been generous and courteous to me and I am quite convinced that he loves the memory of the old days and is sore at their passing. He is determined to keep what he can of life, and you live at his place very much as they lived those fourteen years ago. Or perhaps I should say you could do, six months ago.

All his buildings are thatched and bamboo, all his cooking is done native-fashion, and he allows himself to be imposed upon by poor whites rather than forget the tradition of old hospitable Tahiti. Such crab and lobster and raw fish and *varroo* as Neaa can give you! You can sleep in a native hut on the point with the lagoon murmuring beneath you, and watch the stars through the

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## Nari, Son of Rari

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crannies of the interlaced bamboos. They will serve wreaths of flowers for the head with every meal. There are canoes below in which you can go off to the surf on the reef, and there are fishermen still in *pareus* to show you how to take crabs or spear fish by the light of great flares on dark nights. And, if you please, Neaa will give you a bed in his own house where seven or eight bedsteads stand in a long row and there are only two and a half walls and the doors are never shut. Should you sleep there, too, you will learn that decency can be kept without convention and that Western modesty is a schoolmaster who has taught us to be prudes.

His wife is a descendant of the Pitcairn islanders and a great lady—kindly, gentle, busy, pretty, modest and yet gay. It is great fun to go off with her and the babies and the girls and the men, a big family in which there is master and mistress but not upper or lower class, to the river for a bathe. The rivers are the joy of Tahiti. Here the cool water flows into the great pool beneath huge trees and by a sun-lit bank, and you can dive and swim and laze the golden days away. Neaa's

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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little son and two daughters swim like tadpoles, and his wife will duck you three times to your once. He, big fat man, will dive with incredible grace and scarcely a splash, and stay below so long that you grow anxious. Everybody dries on the stones in the sun after having washed themselves as well as bathed. The women change the scant chemises in which they usually bathe, and slip on clean dresses with more decorum than you see on an English bathing beach. The men slip from one *pareu* into another. We all go home in the dusk, through the long grass and up the country lane, with the happiness of care-free children when the world was young.

Neaa's own views on morality are equally Tahitian. If he likes you, he will express them with a severe simplicity. They ought perhaps not to be written because they will not be understood, but something may be said. Old Tahiti was not immoral because morality had never been defined. This chosen people never went to Sinai. The code which had formed itself among them was based not on fear, not on commandments graven with the finger of God, but on utter simplicity and love.



"A wooden pier with deep clear water for diving."



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## Nari, Son of Rari

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It was thus a topsy-turvy country. For example, a man and a woman for some reason might not be able to make a formal marriage, but plainly that was no reason why they should not love. A husband and wife might cease to love each other, and that was obviously the reason why they should separate and marry again. The public pleading of cruelty and 'misconduct,' with the press advertisement, seemed to them unnecessary. Or there was something obviously peculiar about a man or a woman who had no lover—no qualities to attract the love of *someone*. Children were so lovable that it did not matter whose they were so long as there were children to love. And life was so kind and Nature so generous that private property was futile selfishness and not to laugh and love a sin.

There was even one extraordinary corollary. When the population became too big, steps had to be taken. In Europe celibacy is imposed on superfluous women; in Tahiti a section of the people were offered catholic love and laughter on condition of their childlessness.

These things seem incredible until you talk

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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to Neaa and such as he. Such a philosophy, such a morality, seem to him simple common sense. He fails to see why in the world a child should be cursed because its paternity is dubious. One of his women came for a dance on board our ship, stayed the night in the fo'c'sle and got carried across the bay. She returned after three days. Neaa thought it natural: "she has plenty friends." A girl living with a white man went off to another. Neaa thought it natural: he was "an old mean stick and she didn't love him." In the epidemic many local parents died. Neaa naturally adopted their children: "I got plenty land, so they just come here."

Thus with sorrow I walked with Neaa one night of a full moon by the side of the sea. He unburdened his heart. Tahiti was finished. "The old order changeth, giving place to new." A commercial magnate tore by in a big car on the motor road and he cursed him and his like. He told me a curious story of the burying of a chief away back in the hills years before; of the general mourning and common burden; of the big funeral; of the myriads of birds that thronged the forest as they

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## Nari, Son of Rari

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carried the coffin to its resting-place ; of how he had turned for a last look and seen a pair of great grey lovely doves on the grave. And he told me how he had recently visited the spot, cutting his way to it ; how it was forgotten and how none were left to mourn ; how there and back again he did not see a single bird. Then he shrugged his shoulders with a characteristic Tahitian expression which is an echo of an old cry. Nothing matters. " All is vanity." He himself would go soon. He would be buried at sea.

In the mouth of the valley down which the river flows to the coral reef smoking in the Pacific sun, stands a church of the Latter Day Saints, Josephite Connection ; and opposite Neaa's place, one of the rich Chinamen, who are acquiring all the district, has cut his curious circular Chinese graveyard plainly and very neatly in the green hill-side.

But " Martin Eden " kept his dream.



# CHAPTER VII

## “GREAT LOVERS”

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## “ Great Lovers ”

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### CHAPTER VII

#### “ GREAT LOVERS ”

RUPERT BROOKE'S *Memoir* (by Edward Marsh) supplies the outline of the story of his connection with Tahiti. In December, 1913, he wrote from Fiji that he was off to New Zealand, and “ thence to Tahiti, to hunt for lost Gauguins.” From Auckland: “ Why, precisely, I'm here, I don't know. I seem to have missed a boat somewhere, and I can't get on to Tahiti till the beginning of January. Damn. And I hear that a man got to Tahiti two months ahead of me, and found—and carried off—some Gauguin paintings on glass. DAMN ! ” From Tahiti he wrote in February, 1914: “ I've decided to stay here another month for two very good reasons: (1) that I haven't

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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enough money to get out, (2) that I've found the most ideal place in the world to live and work in. A wide verandah over a blue lagoon, a wooden pier with deep clear water for diving, and coloured fish that swim between your toes. There also swim between your toes, more or less, scores of laughing brown babies from two years to fourteen. Canoes and boats, rivers, fishing with spear, net and line, the most wonderful food in the world—strange fishes and vegetables perfectly cooked. Europe slides from me terrifyingly. . . ." That was from Mataiea, to which we shall return. But by March he was back in Papeete at the Tiare Hotel with coral-poisoned legs, whence he wrote, a little enigmatically : " The Game is Up. If I've gained facts through knocking about with Conrad characters in a Gauguin *entourage*, I've lost a dream or two." In April he climbed on board the Union Steamship Company's line for San Francisco, reflecting, as he left Mataiea, Papeete and his friends, that " there was surely nothing else like them in this world, and very probably nothing in the next," weeping a little, and " very sensibly " going to bed. . . .

All that is only ten years ago, and yet in ten





"The most ideal place in the world to live and work in. A wide verandah . . ."

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## “ Great Lovers ”

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years all has changed. He is dead. I do not think he would now recognise in the present Tiare Hotel the quaint and charming inn that Lovaina, perhaps best and most unusual of hotel hostesses, then ruled so wonderfully. She too is dead. Madame Tetuanui, who kept the ‘ideal place’ for work and life in Mataiea, is dying ; she could not move from the cottage near her former house when I went to see her. Mamua, her daughter—only it was Maaua—is dead too. The very house with the wide verandah is dead—shut up, neglected, empty, since the long illness of Tetuanui ; and the wooden pier is dying. Its old timbers rot in the water, and I took a piece of the sea-stained wood for a remembrance, when we made the photographs. Sitting there on the little jetty I said the lines to myself :

“Mamua, when our laughter ends,  
And hearts and bodies, brown as white,  
Are dust about the doors of friends  
Or scent ablowing down the night,  
Then, oh ! then, the wise agree,  
Comes our immortality.”

Alas and alack : “ There’s little comfort in the wise. . . . ”

But to Rupert Brooke has come another sort of

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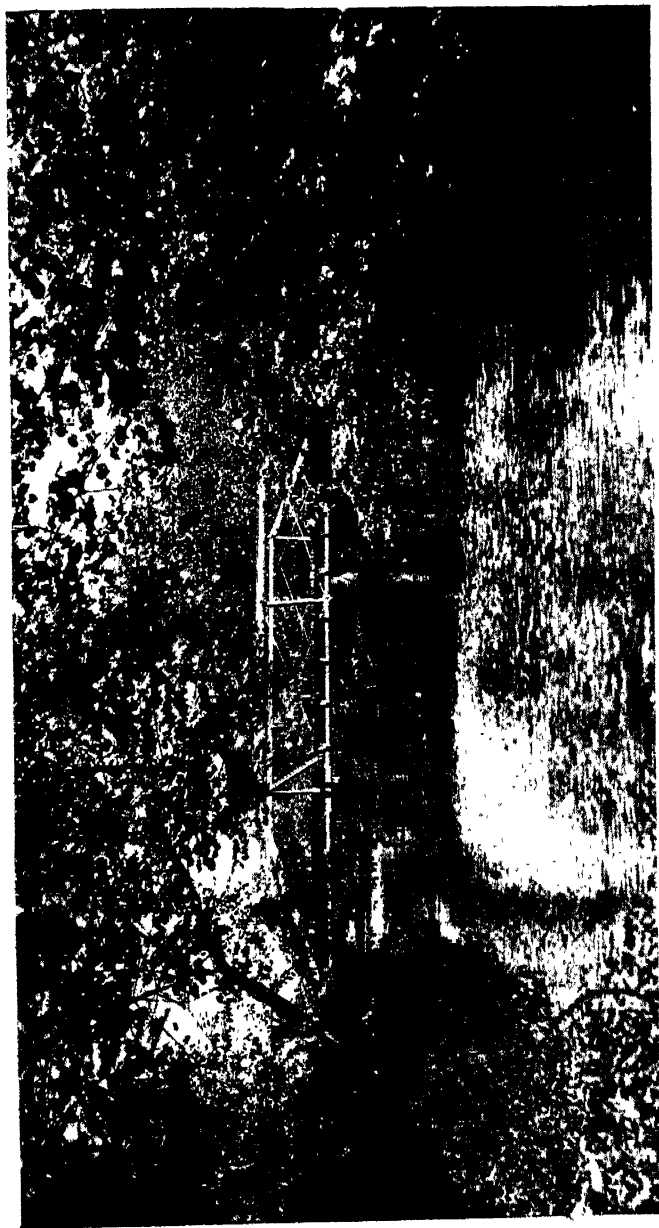
## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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immortality, and I gathered in Mataiea what memories I could. Two poems, "Retrospect" and "The Great Lover" are dated from there, but, as I have said, "Tiare Tahiti" is more than linked with the place through Mamua, as she must be called. More, of the "Pacific" poems, I link "Heaven" certainly with Mataiea, for Tetuanui pointed out to me the stream near the house which he especially loved and by which he would linger. In the photograph the little river shows enough of its fishy heaven. Most Tahitian rivers sing and brawl, clear and weedless, to the sea, but this is lovely with reeds and water-lilies and you can see the fish, "dawdling away their wat'ry noon," among them. The pools he loved were inland, up this river, and up another broader and deeper, and of one such pool we made a photograph. It was undoubtedly one "pool unstirred" in which he used to bathe and of which he writes. And there is another small point upon which I want to comment as has certainly not yet been done.

There is a curious line in "The Great Lover."

"And new-peeled sticks; and shining pools on grass;" it says. I think I can make a suggestion as to those new-peeled sticks. His memory



"A pool unstirred."

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## “ Great Lovers ”

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may, of course, have been merely stirred by boyish recollection, but Tahiti is a land of such sticks. The *burao* tree—the wild hibiscus—haunts the river banks and makes thickets wherever it gets a chance. Its bark peels easily in great strips of the toughest vegetable fibre still used universally by the natives for tying anything, from a roof-pole to a fishing net, that needs to be tied. They break the long straight sticks of *burao*, peel them and throw the sticks away. Tramping through the *burao* thickets—small shady forests in places—my imagination was caught also by the sweet long clean white rods. They strew the path, gleaming, very light in weight, and I have rarely come home from a walk without one, gathered idly for the pleasure of it. By the house of Mataiea is one such wood, and I am certain he came whistling down it in the gloaming and ‘loved’ its new-peeled sticks.

Tetuanui remembered him well. The tears stood in her eyes as we talked of him and as she realised that I had come from far to glean news of him. Pupure (his native name, meaning ‘fair’), she said, was a great favourite with them all. He would wear a *pareu* like a native, and his bare back got terribly burned in the sun though she warned

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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him of the consequences again and again. Maaua, her daughter, used to anoint him with coconut oil and vinegar if the sores were bad. But it was difficult to get him to sit still. In the mornings he used to go to the wharf or the stream and write ; she had heard it said that it was poetry he was writing. Very likely ; he loved so much the native songs and dances. In the afternoons he would be bathing with the children or tramping up the river with the men, spearing shrimps in native fashion. He went very rarely into the town, for he never cared for the girls and drinking there as other white men did. But he was never still. Sometimes he would go off to the mountains for a day or two, camping out ; once he walked right down to the peninsula. And swim ! Why he was quicker in the water than Maaua herself, and he would even swim by night. And she took my hand and kissed it as I went, for I was a friend of Pupure.

Little things, amounting to little, but rather jolly somehow. And I am going to write down about him a story that is far too typically Tahitian to be missed, one that would have amused Brooke too.

The son of Lovaina, whom I shall call by his

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## “ Great Lovers ”

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native name of Pare, is a friend by whose friendship I am honoured. He is one of the very best, generous to a fault like his mother was, jolly, a supreme cook like her too, well read, the soul of kindness. He will forgive me if the laugh is a little against him. For he keeps the Visitors' Book of the old Tiare Hotel which has passed into other hands since his mother's death. He was telling me one day, then, about Brooke—how he had been a great favourite at Lovaina's and how she used to sit with her arm about his neck, laughing and talking with him in her famous seat whence she surveyed the kitchen and the guests—and I asked to see the signature in the old book. Pare was instantly a little embarrassed, but for the love he bore me he at last complied. Gesticulating and apologising, he held out the battered relic, and there, at the bottom of the page, one reads :

“ ——— Brooke, 26, Journalist, Cambridge, England. Jan. 16.”

“ But where,” said I, “ is the Christian name ? ”

“ Oh,” he said, inimitably in his own delightful way, “ oh, I am ashamed to tell you ! Really you know, it is *terrible*. And how I could have been such a *fool* ! But it was like this, and it was not

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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my fault, really it was not. There was an American girl staying here, a very pretty girl, and you know she admired Rupert Brooke's poetry ever so much. She bothered and bothered me until I showed her the book, and then she wanted me to give her his signature. Well, of course, I *couldn't*. But—oh, it was *dreadful*!—she got hold of it and she tore out the Rupert! Whatever could I do? I felt such a *fool*. But there it is—his own writing—Brooke, 26. Wasn't he *young*? ”

Perhaps it is foolish to like the story so much. But it is typical of Tahiti, so like Pare, so characteristic of young ladies! I suppose that somewhere in America is a photograph of Brooke with Rupert in the usual place of signature. And I photographed the page of the book, for it looked to me, as so much that is associated with him, and as his friends in Tahiti, shortly to be “blown about the winds of the world.”

As for the “lost Gauguins” for which Rupert Brooke came to hunt, Tetuanui told me that he heard of a painted door in a house near Papeete and tramped miles to unearth it. But on arrival he found that the native had already exchanged it for a beautiful new door which was triumphantly



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## “ Great Lovers ”

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exhibited. That also, I expect, has gone to America, and if I had had any hope of finding an original poem scribbled on the posts of the ideal verandah, I too “lost a dream or two.”

What did he mean by that? I think I know. No “Great Lover”—and that is how one thinks of Rupert Brooke—can come to Tahiti without losing a dream or two. Enough has been said already in these pages to explain that if one has dreamed of finding the old native life one is doomed to disappointment here. But curiously enough another “Great Lover” has in his book on Tahiti explained the situation better than I can do. It is the best book on the island that has been written, and for that very reason perhaps is not popularly known. It is a sad book, for more reasons than one, and in it George Calderon depicts, with simple truth, at once the beauty and the sorrows of the Isle of Dreams.

He was here in 1906, and while he moved about a good deal and can hardly be claimed by any one district, the nearest approach to permanency is illustrated in our photograph. The house in which he spent many weeks almost alone with his thoughts and his dreams stands on the edge of Mataiea

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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and may well be associated with it. Like that in which Brooke lived, it is already falling into decay. In itself, also, it has no beauty. But from the door, from the back verandah upon which he must often have sat in the evening, there is a lovely view. A small precipitous valley runs down here to the sea with a trickle of white water falling in it through the frame of palms. It is just such a place as he would have loved.

A man who knew him well says that "his wit, his chivalry, his unconventionality, his active and impetuous mind stamped everything that he did or said with a strong individuality." Of Brooke, too, that might have been written. This same Rugby friend of Calderon gives us a little picture which is worth quoting, as it seems to me. "I think of him, for instance, on the Broads, rising in the grey of dawn to work at some obscure Slavonic dialect; or at Broadstairs tossing off one-act plays of a lightness and audacity that left me gasping; or seated at the piano with a particular air of absorption that I know well but cannot describe; or playing pot-cricket in his crimson shirt with an equal though different kind of absorption." Or again: "He belonged to the type of man to



"From the door . . . there is a lovely view."

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## “ Great Lovers ”

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whom life is neither a holiday nor an opportunity for acquiring comfort, but a great adventure. . . . From first to last there was always in him something of the knight-errant.”

It was just such a man who could tell the truth about Tahiti. So anxious was he to do so that his wife tells us how for seven years after his return he did not write a line lest romance should too highly colour his pages. When he did at length sit down to his task, so strongly had the island life impressed him that he found he had lost nothing by the delay. But we have done so. The war interrupted the work. As with Brooke, so with Calderon—the great lovers of beauty and kindly folk and unconventionality could not stand by idle with the world in agony. Calderon “ vanished in the smoke of battle,” leaving to us his dream.

I shall not quote much from his book. It cannot be done with success here. It is a book of pen pictures, interspersed with longer essays and illustrated by pencil sketches of types and friends which are far more true than an English untravelled reader can know. One sees that again and again he saw with Gauguin's eyes. The faces of his subjects have in them something of the terror and

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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the beauty, of the savagery and the kindliness, of Nature. They haunt one. They are far more "photographic," it is true, far more gentle, far more simple than the pictures of the French artist. But they illustrate unfathomed depths, strange sorrows, and long years. They, too, are a record of a race that has all but passed away. Of those whom Calderon drew I personally could only find one now alive. The nineteen years that have elapsed have been 'black oxen,' ploughing deep.

The Papeete that he knew was still remote from motor-cars and regular mails, but the shadow lay already upon it. He penetratingly describes its still curious mixture of ugly cheap building and natural loveliness. He can still see in its people the traces of a dream. After a "native" party he writes :

"There was a picturesqueness in the entertainment—Bottom and the Fairies, the Greek God and the Roman Emperor. But how little they were seconded by their surroundings. Were these all accidents of the surface? No, the fatal question murmured by Tupuna—'A la Canaque? Oui, à la Canaque'—had given it away. It was then only the question of changing the stop in the

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## “ Great Lovers ”

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barrel and the tune would be changed. This was all deliberate, chosen, a setting, a stage mounting, a *décor*. Well, what if it was, did that destroy the essence of it? By no means; only if you subtracted the *décor* there was really nothing left. Therefore I came to the conclusion that in this house I had seen nothing of native life. The native life was in the heads and veins of these girls; it lay hidden beneath a rubbish heap of European phrases and grimaces.”

It cannot be said better. When next you read the rhapsodies of a tourist, remember those words. Remember that, in that he has rhapsodised, he shews you that he has been adding to the rubbish.

Calderon left, like the rest of us, for the country. It was nineteen years ago and he found better there. You can still find better there, but not what Calderon found. Or I think not. Yet when he writes of one Amaru, “ everything that Amaru does is poetry to me, for he always begins at the beginning,” he writes of what still lingers; and when he tells of “ salt water lapping gently at the bottom of a grey rocky cliff ” and of “ the rich delight, when hot with walking, of going up a hollow of the hill, undressing, and going down into at iny

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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rill among the flowering grasses," to bathe there "beneath a little cascade to the sound of murmuring water," he tells of what Tahiti offers to any 'lover' yet.

Calderon's last chapter is in itself an epitome of the whole story. There is the old man using what the scholar thought to be an ancient Polynesian word, but which turns out to be a corruption, its origin long since forgotten, of an English expression ; there is the Protestant pastor cursing the Roman Catholics ; there is an early cinematograph that was 'pandemonium' ; and yet there was Amaru and his wife and friends, come in from the country to say good-bye with tears, to offer the last coconut and pick flamboyant pods for the children—all in a page and a half. And set down below are two verses from a Tahitian song which I shall not quote for they really do not bear translation. But in them murmurs the wind and the drops of rain, in them is the scent of the island lily and the thunder of the waves in the pass, and in them is the burden of lament, age-long, unreproachful but heart-broken, of lover to lover who will never return.

CHAPTER VIII  
**A PACIFIC SAGA**





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## A Pacific Saga

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### CHAPTER VIII

#### A PACIFIC SAGA

ON leaving Mataiea, one enters the district of Papeari. A true surprise is in preparation, and almost at once a distinct change even in the very vegetation that borders the road can be noted. Perhaps its sign-post is a giant grove of the Tahitian tree, the *mape*, which one finds on the left as one rounds a corner, for while the *mape* is an indigenous tree, associated with the old legends and traditions of the island and its people, these are the first to be met that civilisation has left since we left Papeete. Strangely gnarled and twisted, the great trunks climb up from the swamp at their roots, and so thick are their high-reaching branches and leaves

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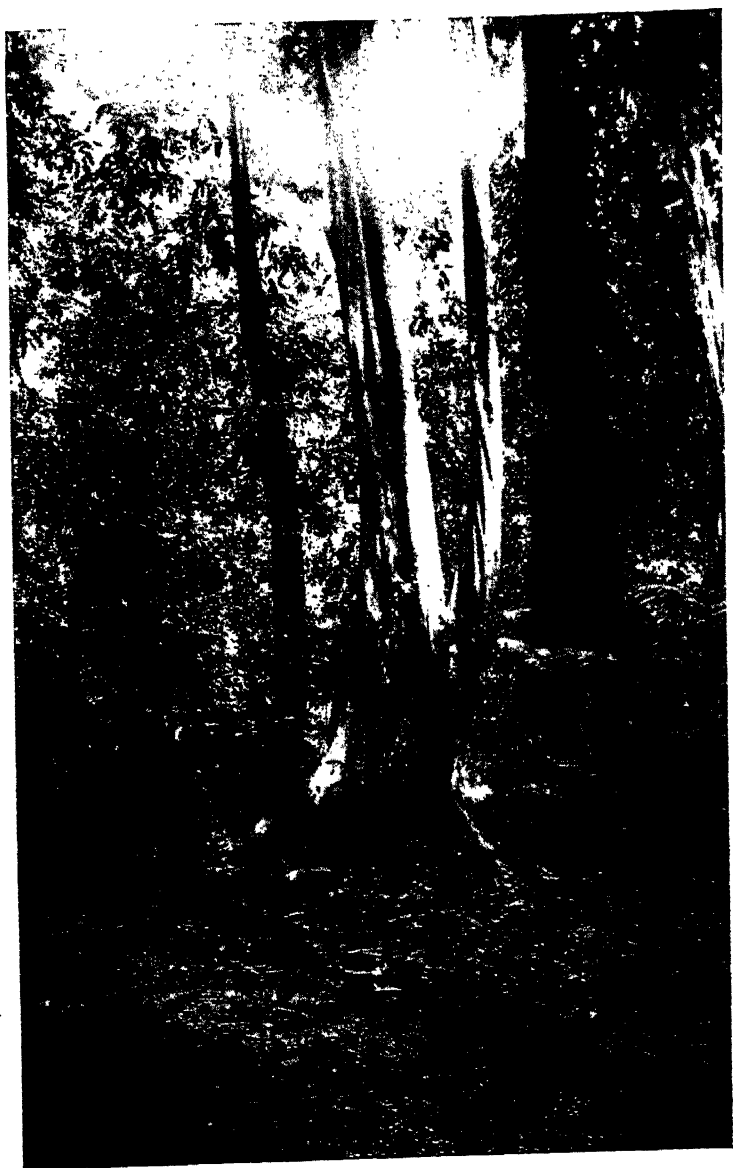
## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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that beneath is ever tropic shade. Far up most valleys all over the island you may find the *mape* yet, but in the favoured lands to come it is still a common tree.

The road swings away from the sea for a mile or two. Giant ferns rising from rich thick green grass, fewer and smaller coconut plantations and river after river mark our way. The rainfall is higher here, and never does Papeari know the droughts which leave Papeete a prey to the sun in the height of the Antipodean winter. And then suddenly, topping a little rise, the road runs down to Port Phaeton.

There is nothing like this anywhere else in the island, nor, for that matter, anywhere else in the south-eastern Pacific. A great harbour, far indented to right and left, drives in from the sea and all but succeeds in cutting Tahiti in two. Halting just there where the road debouches upon a causeway that crosses a shallow arm of the inlet, or better still climbing up a little as is possible to overlook the whole bay, the scene below and around utterly fulfils the all but legendary story of the far South Seas. Gazing out to sea, there is the



"A giant grove of the Tahitian tree, the *mape*."

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## A Pacific Saga

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creamy line of the always restless reef far out ; but listen : you can catch its murmur on the scented air. Coconut and pandanus crowd down to the still lagoon on the right as solid almost in reflection as in life ; and away to the left, across the bay, in a wide majestic sweep, the mountains of Vairao and Teahupoo, with crown of drifting cloud and swift play of sun and shadow, rifted with great valleys and clothed with wealth of fern, give true promise of the magic that is theirs. Here is every island delight. Beaches of golden sand, beaches of white coral, beaches of black lava dust, are here. You can plunge through fifty feet of translucent water towards the gleaming treasures of the sea's deep bed, or watch the rainbow fish playing in the shallows of the coral. Rivers ever cool and shaded by great *mapes*, deep in silent pools and laughing swift in shallows, are here ; and the white tropic bird still floats dreamily down from the mountains in the early sun for his keen fishing. You can picture great sailing canoes making home from far stormy seas to this sheltered haven, or a fleet putting hence to sea for discovery and conquest. And you will be right, for

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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here, where still scarcely a modern building spoils the picture and you can count the white settlers on your fingers, lies dreaming before you one of the real homes of the Polynesian people, the haven, more than likely, from which the historic fleet sailed in A.D. 1350 for the colonisation of New Zealand.

Has any other race, I wonder, a more romantic story than the Polynesian?—romantic not only in its web and woof, but in the very reading and recording. The Polynesian Society was formed in time to read that record ere it perished utterly, and to men like Mr. Percy Smith, its first President, and Judge Fornander of Hawaii, those of us who care to learn owe all. So far as I am personally concerned, it was to the former's little book "Hawaiki" that I went when, in Papeari itself, the enchantment of this great and (in Eastern Polynesia) all but vanished people first took hold upon me.

Briefly, then, it is possible to look back to the basin of the Ganges with Buddha scarcely dead—four hundred and fifty years before Christ—for the appearance in history of this wonderful race. Earlier than that it is scarcely useful to go, for to

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## A Pacific Saga

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do so you have to leave what I shall at once call history, what is indeed no less than the consciousness of the race itself. Beyond that, at any rate, you are within the period of great indistinct stock-movements—Aryan, and the like—with mystical names cropping up even in scientific books, such as Ur of the Chaldees, which are best left to the scholars. Any way, 450 B.C. is a respectable antiquity, putting our own 55 B.C. into the shade.

But by 65 B.C. the Polynesian had migrated, probably before another Aryan invasion, to Java and the islands of Indonesia, the real “Hawaiki,” or home of the race, whence they set out, the call of the sea in their ears, on their great voyages. Roughly they were in Fiji by 450 A.D., in Samoa a hundred and fifty years later, in Hawaii by 650, and in the Marquesas, settled, a generation later. There were Polynesians in Tahiti about 800,—before Alfred burnt the cakes. Then followed periods of voyages, here and there, up and down, in the Pacific, even as late as 1250 there being occasional communication with the old home in Java. And while during the next fifty years sundry voyages were made to New Zealand, it

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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was in 1350 that the historic fleet settled the Dominion, sailing from Tahiti, dubbing mountain and creek and reef of their new world with the loved names of the old.

That is the outline of the story, but there is far more of it than an outline. To confine oneself to Tahiti, great names and great doings come down with distinctness from that remote past: Tu-nui, of the time of our Canute, of whom there is a great rune which reverberates in Time like a verse out of Genesis and enshrines the mountains and rivers of Punaauia ; Onokura, who lived and warred about the time of the Norman Conquest, who was born in Tautira and sailed from Papeari on an odyssey of romance and adventure to the Marquesas and the Cooks ; and Tangiia—the great Tangiia—a child about the time that Stephen Langton was forcing King John to sign the great Charter, who lived on the Vaihiria, and whose songs of love and war were to be sung even in New Zealand. Indeed of Tangiia a book might well be written : how he fled on incredible voyages before Tu-tapu, “ The Relentless Pursuer,” beating against the trade 4,200 miles from Fiji to Easter Island to



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## A Pacific Saga

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fetch his adopted son, sailing before it to Java, missing his landfall on the way home and encountering the icy waves even of the Antarctic, winning back to Raratonga and building his Westminster Abbey there as it was all but until our day. Nor is it a fragmentary story. The great canoes are named, like the *White Ship* or the *Great Harry* of our own story, the wise sayings are recorded, and the names of fair women, for whom these chieftains fought and died, ring like chimes in the telling.

*In the telling*—that is precisely it, for not one word of all this detailed history was ever written down. It was too sacred for that. Our Bible is illustration enough of the easy falsification of records, once, in an unhistoric age, they are committed to paper, and the Polynesian wise men did better than that. Colleges of hereditary priests, teaching in special sacred buildings, saw to it that the tradition of their people was maintained and continued without the change of a syllable or the omission of a name. As the things taught were sacred, so the gods brooded there to catch the neophyte in any error and visit him with wrath.

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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And as the years rolled by, Nature herself lent a hand and developed in the priests a specialised memory that is as remarkable as anything in the history of this remarkable people.

This primitive history seems to be best illustrated for Westerns by the writings of the Old Testament, and if anyone wishes to know what would have been repeated to him solemnly by some ancient *tohunga* in the *whare-kura* he has only to wade through such chapters as Genesis IV and V or the first ten of 1 Chronicles, with a story like that of Samson or Jehu occasionally thrown in. Genealogies, with a scrap now and again of story, are not, it must be admitted, light literature, but if accurate, a scholar may draw from them wonderful history. Of both Polynesian history has been made.

The race had a common origin in Indonesia ; it had periods of migratory activity, spreading sporadically from island to island ; while roughly from A.D. 1350 onwards communication over the longer distances ceased. It is thus obvious that, if these oral histories are correct, there should be names common to all in the beginning, there should

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## A Pacific Saga

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be names found at approximately the same number of generations back common to two or to three genealogical lines if tradition has it that at that period there was migration and inter-marriage, and of great events involving several islands there should be a common tradition in those islands. In a word, we are dealing with oral trails blazed into the past, which intersect and separate again, which for long periods run parallel, from which branch trails put out, but which terminate at one point. If it can be shewn that there has not been collaboration or collusion, then an expert examination should at once establish and check Polynesian history.

In a short chapter it is obvious that no proof of these things can be attempted, but the labour of such men as Mr. Percy Smith has shewn precisely that this has been done. For example, he relates a fascinating story of his interview with an old man of Raratonga, ninety-six or so, who had been taught the story of the sailing of the great fleet to New Zealand before Raratonga had been brought into touch with the outside world since the middle of the fourteenth century. Beyond

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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reasonable doubt, the saga had been accurately handed down for close on five hundred years, and the modern listener heard from human lips the details of the canoes, their names, the incidents of travel, the marvels of the discoveries—greenstone, volcanic glass, the moa or dinornis—which the first voyagers had made, and other features of the heroic story. All these agreed *in toto* with the story as preserved in the New Zealand tradition. Conceive it being possible, in a Devonshire village, to hear the detailed story of an ancestral eyewitness, not of one of Nelson's voyages, not of the Armada, but of the fleet that carried Edward's army to the campaign of Crécy! Or again, at approximately twenty-five generations ago in each case, the genealogical tables of New Zealand, Raratonga, Tahiti and Hawaii converge on common ancestors in Hua and his brother Whiro, contemporaries of Tangiia, and at approximately ninety-four generations back in each case the four lines give common ancestors in one Te Nga-taito-ariki, his father Te Tumu and even his nephew Tu-te-rangi-marama. Thus since 450 B.C. in solemn conclave in the holy places



"Lovely with reeds and water-lilies."

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## A Pacific Saga

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have these lists of many hundred names been recorded and borne across the world from island to island, from each old home to each new landfall, through tempest and war and every vicissitude, without error and without forgetfulness, until in our times, in face of the near extermination of their race, the last solemn priests, some of them possessed also of our learning, have seen that the exclusive tradition must be broken down if anything were to be saved and have imparted them to white foreigners and to printed books. He is without imagination who cannot admire so great a racial pride, so invaluable a service to knowledge, so imperishable a sacred lore, and where is any admiration there will be also lasting shame. It was to these 'savages' that our upstart race brought venereal disease, potent spirits and Victorian Christianity. It was we who, in building a commercial empire, have cut short by the way as noble a tradition as the world has ever seen.

As one reads these great Pacific sagas one wonders indeed what manner of men were they who could do such deeds. Ascend in imagination some one or other of the valleys that run down from

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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the mountains here in Papeari to this lovely bay, and there, rising high in the hot and scented air from the tangle of lush grass and matted vine and creeper, you will see the forest giants which they hewed with stone adzes for their canoes. Great double canoes seventy to a hundred feet long, double-masted, capable of carrying fifty fighting men, they made—the labour of a tribe for months or years—launched with sacrifice and prayer, loved with the hearts of sailors born, and served with the thews of as physically fine a race as Earth ever bred. No wonder that when such craft were named and took the water they passed for ever into song and story as did the dragon ships of our own viking ancestors. With the statues of the gods in the prow, provisioned with cooked bread-fruit paste and fern-root cakes which would keep a year, under huge matting sails when possible or driven ceaselessly by strong arms, they dared voyages the equal or superior of those of Rollo the Northman or Vasco da Gama or Columbus. They had no compass, but they read the stars as a woman reads the face of the man she loves ; and in the end they learned the paths of the trackless Pacific

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## A Pacific Saga

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and the way to even the more remote of the island paradises upon it. With fibre and slithers of bamboo they constructed the rude charts on which the very winds were written. And they had souls. They loved as they travelled the wonders of the seas ; they heard in the sea-bird's call the voice of romance and adventure ; and they knew, as they dared the storm and the calm, the heat of the tropic sun or the cold of the frozen South, that they and theirs were truly children of the gods. Well, the gods of a ravished world are dead or dying, and, maybe it is not so ill that their sons are dying too.

How ever, in these incredible immensities of ocean, the more lonely islands were found, must remain in some degree a mystery. On the map the Pacific may seem so dotted with islands that a canoe setting off at a venture could not fail to hit upon one, but of course it is not so. In a modern steamer you can sail clean through even the thickly studded Paumotus group and not see a sign of an island. If a straight drift before the wind might take one sometimes from Fiji to Samoa, what chance or luck was it that picked up the tiny scrap



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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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of Easter Island in the waste of water ? The Cook Islands make a pretty group on the map, but how know whither to sail from Raratonga to pick up Aitutaki ? There is nothing to be seen until the navigator is but a league or two distant.

Probably only the successful voyages found record, says the historian, hiding how many grim tragedies of the ocean beneath a mouthful of words ! Skall to the unknown brave who put so gallantly to sea and never returned therefrom, and to the mothers and wives of an imperial race who bore and sent them again and again down to the insatiable sea in ships ! For the rest, the great first voyages were probably made by fleets of ten or more canoes strung out across the face of the ocean to the utmost limit which would permit of navigation in touch with one another. In a sweep of sixty miles of sight we may suppose them to have come, climbing the great rollers, descending the vast depths. Thirteen hundred years ago, Ui-te-rangiora—hard as his name is, remember it ; it is the name of a hero—sailed in some such fleet far far to the south. The daring navigator left in the tradition of this semi-tropical people accounts of icebergs—



A river in Papeari.

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## A Pacific Saga

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“cold rocks growing out of the sea ; of a sea covered with “scraped white stuff”—the nearest they could get to snow; of the walrus—“a deceitful animal of that sea who dives to great depths”; and of the great leaves of the bull-kelp, over fifty feet long, which they took to be the tresses of some female monster. As he went South by the island of Rapa and as about this time it is known that Tahiti was first discovered, there is no reason why we should not imagine, here in Papeari, that perhaps it was the mariners of his far-flung ice-scraped fleet who first sighted the twin heights separated by the isthmus of Taravao which were to be known in Polynesian story as ‘the Pillars of Tahiti,’ and who thought without much exaggeration, here in our lovely sun-kissed bay, that they had made a landfall at long last of the Polynesian Paradise.



CHAPTER IX

**FAIRYLAND**

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## Fairyland

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### CHAPTER IX

#### FAIRYLAND

PORT PHAETON is truly enough the gateway to a Polynesian Paradise. Those seemingly gently-sloping hills of the peninsula, or, to give it its native name, of Taiarapu, are, authentically, of the stuff of dreams. That great lover, George Calderon, wrote of it as follows :

“ I am now in the peninsula of Taiarapu, a rich, deep-bosomed country of low, sloping hills, long, luxuriant grass, bamboo villages bowered in shady forests. The people of Taiarapu in the old days, cut off by the isthmus from the mainland, led a half-independent life and hardly acknowledged the suzerainty which the kings of the mainland

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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claimed over them. The Taiarapuans of to-day, as advanced as any other of the islanders in the arts of life, still retain the fresh vigour of the age of gold. . . . Out of ' The Arabian Nights ' swings by a brown-skinned fisherman bearing a pole on his shoulders hung with those fairyland fishes of translucent scarlet and turquoise blue. A group of women go by ; the foremost carries a heavy bundle on her left arm, a mass of linen in her hands before her and a child astride her right hip. . . . A naked man comes galloping along the road on a thick-set horse, his right hand hanging behind his hip, as a Red Indian rides. . . . De Bougainville . . . called it Paradise."

But I do not think Calderon saw as much of it as one might gather from this extract. If he had done, he would have used other adjectives than " low " and " sloping " for the hills, which only at this distance and on a cursory inspection give that impression. He cannot have climbed up on them and he cannot have made the circuit of the peninsula. Few indeed do. But let us go.

There is a road about Port Phaeton, but it is better to cross the water in a canoe. The harbour

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## Fairyland

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is deeply indented and of curious depths. Now there is anchorage at twenty fathoms a few feet from the shore, and now an entire inlet is only a couple of feet deep. Tongues of low sandy land, where the pandanus flourishes, push out into the sea, blocking, from the road, the lovely view. In a canoe, striking across to Vairao, the great mountains of the main island behind one slowly reveal themselves in a scene of grandeur and beauty of which it is hard to say too much. And any way, if we strike in among the coconuts, we soon find an abrupt barrier of five or six hundred feet which has to be negotiated almost on hands and knees. This barrier, at the extreme end of Taiarapu, rises in some cases sheer, in others nearly so, out of the lagoon, rises in a succession of monstrous hewn triangular hills that are all of them covered with bush. The road, which has been running through Vairao and the next district of Teahupoo, straggles across a final river and gives up in despair. It is literally a feat of mountaineering to go by land all round this "Pari" as it is called. But a canoe or a launch will open up mile on mile of enchanted coast,



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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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fantastic in outline, deserted, a veritable fairy-land. Of part of it, seen under one aspect, Loti writes: "We crept along the shoulder of a mountain by the only path, whence we had a wide view over the vast expanse of ocean, with here and there a low islet covered with improbable-looking vegetation: pandanus of antediluvian aspect, and forests which might be relics of the extinct period of the Lias. A solemn leaden sky, like that of a past age, a shrouded sun dragging long shafts of pale silver over the wide waters. . . ."

But no "creeping along the shoulder" of the mountains gives a view comparable to that to be obtained by climbing this initial barrier. Paths up are rare, but taking one, the climber comes out on a great rolling plateau waist deep in fern. This plateau slopes up the ragged crags, and down, at the far end, to the wild upheaval of the Pari. Everywhere, too, it is intersected by great valleys which must have been rent open in some colossal cataclysm of the primeval period. Grasping a tree, you can peer down into them—literally peer down, or, here and there, scramble and clutch your way into the depths. Conceive a practically sheer wall of a

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## Fairyland

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thousand feet or more which is simply one knit mass of *feis* (a species of wild banana) and bush. Or, arrived at the bottom, here is a paradise. A furious clear stream will be tearing its wild way over rocks and boulders, under fern and palm ; there will be orange trees covering the ground in places with the fallen golden fruit ; clumps of feathery bamboo grow thick and unchecked in all their glory ; the 'ti' palm seizes upon every inch ; banana, coffee, ginger, spices, limes, battle with each other ; and now and again the solemn *mapes* have cleared a space with their shade. It is as different from the 'deserted valley' as can well be imagined, save only that it is equally deserted. Possibly the silence will be disturbed by the voices of a couple of natives who have come here gathering *feis*, but more probably there is scarcely a sound. Only the fall of the stream, the occasional rare note of the Pacific bird, and by night, the shrilling of the cicadas. Only the faint breeze in the tangles of the taller trees. Only the patter of rain on the gigantic leaves of *taro*.

I suppose most people would soon be a good

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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deal bored. I cannot, it is true, imagine the majority of tourists happy there. But they are never likely, even if they read this book, to invade that Paradise. The gates are guarded far too well. But they can be forced by the eager and the strong, and then, I know of no such peace. The world is utterly shut out. Empires may fall and great republics rise ; liners may anchor off Papeete and the European markets be frenziedly 'alarmed' ; the printing-presses may work night and day, and the great public may pass what judgment it will on this and other works ! Nothing matters. You do not want to read. Knowledge is vanity. Here at last is peace that passeth understanding, that the world cannot give.

But one climbs out again, if only to survey once more the far-stretching panorama that no camera can truly photograph and no artist has portrayed. Lying high up there, on the fern, it is to me a marvellous thing that it should be my heritage. Away and away the main island lies folded in white mists whereof the sun weaves scarves and tissues of light and colour. On either side you can see the encircling ocean. At your feet



" A couple of natives gathering feis."

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## Fairyland

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Port Phaeton lies open to your gaze, with never a mast or a sail on its placid face. Its barrier reef shows so truly here—a great deep white scar in the emerald and amethyst sea. Where it is broken the foam fumes about the coral and boils in its embrace. In the lagoon this height allows you to see clearly mapped the varying depths at which the corals grow, so that it lies there in the sun, a sheet of translucent water mottled with purple and pink and blue and green. It appears as if one could toss a stone on to the crowded coconuts of the shore, far, far below. And, lifting one's eyes, there is the Pacific at last. It is almost as if one had never seen it before. You know the truth. You know you are infinitesimal on a tiny point of rock that rises, naked and lone, into the infinite vast of sea and sky.

Let me tell you, now, of that reef itself that you see like a white scar from this height. Here, off Vairao, Teahupoo and the Pari, it is nearly a mile on the average from the shore. Paddle out to it and you realise what it is. Between it and the shore, as you go, you can as a rule see to the bottom at varying depths, the exception being big stretches

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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that lie between some opening in the reef and probably the mouth of the river that has made it. Drifting over, it is, indeed, as so often has been said, as if one floated in some new element that could not be water (so clear is it) and is yet just not air. Of the coral I shall say little. It has all been done. But there will be, at one time, a hundred yards of great toadstools, at another a hundred yards of colossal fans, at another the branched pink and white 'flowers' that sailors and travellers bring home. In and out among them swim the fish. But wait.

The barrier reef itself is more like some great concrete jetty that has been broken a little by the sea than anything else I can think of. It is a couple of feet out of the lagoon where we land, clutching with boat-hook and avoiding the cascades of sea-water that keep foaming across it. Once out of the boat, you find it is easily possible to walk, and you can cross it to the ocean side. And there you will have one of the unforgettable experiences of life.

For on the ocean side, the reef falls sheer to unimaginable depths. On very calm days you can

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## Fairyland

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stand on the edge and peer down where sometimes it is like a sheer wall, sometimes like some broken battlement, disappearing into blue and green profundities of colour. But on rough days (and they are the more common) it presents a spectacle of utter grandeur. The long mountainous Pacific rollers come in without check until, with utter abrupt arrest, they find themselves upon the reef. They crash in thunder on the mighty mass. They spout twenty, thirty feet into the sun, for here is no shelving beach to take their rage. You stand but a few yards away. See that roller—why, it will carry us away! No—hold your ground. There! The sun-shot green tons of water have crashed on the impregnable; they have been flung like fountains to the sky; they have fallen shattered and harmless—stand firm. The broken tide sweeps across the reef, ankle or knee deep, in a tempestuous flood, and boils over into the still lagoon in impotent wrath.

As we walk along we find a great fissure split in the reef across our path. Put on water-glasses, kneel, take firm hold and plunge your head beneath the surface. For thirty seconds or so you can

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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gaze into literally and absolutely the fairyland of the children's story-books.

Imagine a small window in the dome of St. Paul's. Climbing on the outside of that dome, you push your head through and gaze down. That is what you have done on this reef. For it is hollow. Below are enormous caverns, and this fissure is a hole in the roof of one such cavern. For hundreds of feet the water is shot with light, and you can see—see the unbelievable, the supernatural, the tales of faerie.

Pillars of pink and white and purple alabaster, shot with veins of green and gold and silver, sustain the roof. Far, far down the white sandy floor slopes into the mists of depth. Fantastic castles of coral, battlemented, towered and turreted, lift towards you. Flights of little fish, literally living sapphires or emeralds, dart by. Sapphire or emerald forsooth!—there are flights of little fish of every imaginable colour and combinations of colour that any artist has ever dreamed. You will see orange fish barred with blue, and black fish barred with silver, and green fish eyed with scarlet, and square fish and tubular fish and flat fish and



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## Fairyland

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fish that drive every last belief out of you, for what power, in the name of human sanity, could have conceived them? There are beasts there more lovely than birds of paradise, more hideous than a nightmare. There are beasts there that are *both*, at once, though you may not believe it. There are sea-anemones and sea-urchins as big as footballs, and cod-fish as big as Grenadier guardsmen, and sea-horses as small as shrimps. There are shells with a tremulous wave of beauty a-flutter from them, and there are crabs with the faces of politicians. Crabs! Every empty shell contains a crab. There are crabs in shells as small as a seed or as big as my head. And the thirty seconds are now up, which is well, for already you do not believe the half that you have seen.

There is a stretch of thirty-five miles of lagoon known to me where river after river falls from the plateau to the sea, where mile on mile is an untrodden Paradise, where league on league runs the unvisited reef. There is, for example, the Black Cave, that you approach by a winding river, a tropical forest, a steep slope under a falling hill and a deep silent sunless pool across which you must

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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swim in the dark to turn the corner at its head and find light at last trickling upon a rounded stone that rises there, lone in subterranean depths, and hallowed by long centuries of Polynesian lore. By the mercy of God, no one comes. Two or three times a year a small party of natives may visit this or that mile of shore for the coco-nuts that have been growing untended since their last visit, and there are fisher-canoes out on the lagoon occasionally. But most tourists have not energy to get beyond the motor-road, and, besides, they have no time. They mean, as a matter of fact, that they have got too much. They wear watches and talk in terms of days and dates. They have to do. Nine-tenths of the world has to do. And that is why there is still fairyland, for those for whom time is of no more account are too few to trample down its beauties even with their clumsy feet.



“ By the mercy of God, no tourist comes.”

CHAPTER X  
AN ISLAND VILLAGE

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## An Island Village

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### CHAPTER X

#### AN ISLAND VILLAGE

THERE is only one real village in this island of Tahiti. Papeete is a town, even a city since it has a cathedral, and from Papeete you can run in a motor-car seventy-two kilometres until you reach the turning that takes you down to the bulbous peninsula so curiously tacked on by a neck of low land to the main island, without passing through any collection of buildings big enough to be called a village. All the way, as I have said, you will be seeing houses, iron and wood villas nine times out of ten and as ugly as their perfect surroundings will let them be, but there are a few score metres between each. Each faces the road, the modern dusty road of the daily motor-lorries, and is

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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indifferent to the sweep of the sea from which it is allowed to remain cut off by low trees or to the piled mountain masses from which the coconuts screen it. At intervals two or three may cluster near a church or school, but not in sufficient numbers to constitute much community life. If you leave the road, which no self-respecting tourist ever does, you may hit upon one or two poor collections of fisher huts, but these are mere stranded Tahitians awaiting the inevitable end. They are not enough to count.

But take that turning to the peninsula (if you do not pass on round the island from our Fairy-land of the last chapter), and you will run under the lee of high mountains with the heights of the main island glimpsing across the water through the trees, run by villas still, with villaish gardens too, but with just a suggestion of something not quite Western. And in the end the road reaches high volcanic cliffs hung with fern, skirts them precariously, and fetches up at a river to which there is no bridge. There you are. Perforce the lorries must stop. You must hire a cart of sorts to get on with your luggage, or take off your trousers if you

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## An Island Village

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want to keep dry. And a mile or so further, where the road itself to all intents and purposes ends, cluster houses in a real village.

The village has thus an isolation. Once a week a schooner puts in from Papeete if the weather be fine ; once a week a lorry fetches up as far as it can go ; but the folk who live there have to depend upon themselves to some extent. Their village is a village with its own corporate existence, and, what is more to our purpose, it is a village not so unlike such villages as are scattered throughout all this group of islands. There are islands where trading schooners do not go ; there are islands where they only go once a month ; there are others, I believe, where their coming now makes little difference ; but for the most part this village is a good enough example of what the Pacific has come to be.

To begin with, it is amazingly beautiful. As you cross the river you catch your breath, and what you see as you cross, you can see from the village beach also, since the river turns and twists on its road to the sea. A great rugged mountain lifts its unclimbed head right up the valley ; palms



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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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and ferns and tropic plants line the steep sides ; the water is clear and fresh and singing over stones ; blue and green unite and blend in loveliness. Seawards, the sun glints on coconut fronds and flashes on the coral of the reef and the white surf. Maybe a white frigate bird will come sailing serenely down the breeze or a blue heron rise from his fishing on the shore.

A hibiscus hedge of pink and orange and red blossom, mixed with yellow oleander, leads through what might be a park of unfenced beauty to the village street. Here the road is wholly grass-grown for there is practically no traffic, and the houses that line it at frequent and irregular intervals are tossed down anywhere among flowers and shrubs. The chief's house is not to be distinguished from the rest, and if you met the chief you would not know him. He is no longer a full-blooded physically magnificent Tahitian, in native dress. But canoes are drawn up on the shore, and men wear *pareus*, or native skirts, not infrequently. There is always a breeze ; always sea and sky and mountain are delectable ; and Stevenson declared that he had found nothing more lovely in the whole Pacific.



“ A great rugged mountain lifts its head right up the valley.”

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## An Island Village

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Yes, Robert Louis Stevenson, for he was here in 1888. He himself, with his wife, his mother and his step-son sailed in the schooner yacht *Casco* at the end of June from San Francisco, arriving in the Marquesas at the end of July and in Tahiti during the first week of November—the beginning of the rains. The *Casco* required re-masting, and for this purpose the Stevenson family abode awhile in Papeete, but, Robert Louis Stevenson falling ill, they went to live in this district of Tautira. Here he practically wrote “The Master of Bal-lantrae,” which thus becomes a Tahitian book. From this village he dated a number of letters in praise of its beauty and of its people. Indeed he might have remained there for ever if—in point of fact, though it does not appear in the letters—he had not found the continual trade winds made an atmosphere too temperate for his condition. It is easy to show that he would have liked to have done so.

“Tautira (the Garden of the World).

“November, 1888.

“ . . . Whether I have a penny left in the wide world, I know not, nor shall know, till I get to

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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Honolulu, where I anticipate a devil of an awakening. It will be from a mighty pleasant dream at least : Tautira being mere Heaven. . . .

“ Do tell Henley I write this just after having dismissed Ori, the sub-chief, in whose house I live, Mrs. Ori, and Pairai, their adopted child, from the evening hour of music : during which I publickly (with a k) Blow on the Flageolet. These are words in truth. . . . Ori is exactly like a colonel in the Guards. . . . ”

Or again, here is part of the proposed dedication to a South Sea travel book :

“ One November night, in the village of Tautira, we sat at the high table in the hall of assembly, hearing the natives sing. It was dark in the hall and very warm ; though at times the land wind blew a little shrewdly through the chinks, and at times, through the larger openings, we could see the moonlight on the lawn. As the songs arose in the rattling Tahitian chorus, the chief translated here and there a verse. You are to conceive us, therefore, in strange circumstances

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## An Island Village

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and very pleasing ; in a strange land and climate, the most beautiful on earth ; surrounded by a foreign race that all travellers have agreed to be the most engaging ; and taking a double interest in two foreign arts."

And yet again I cannot refrain from quoting at some length the following :

" You are to imagine a four-wheeled gig ; one horse ; in the front seat two Tahiti natives, in their Sunday clothes, blue coat, white shirt, kilt of a blue stuff with big white or yellow flowers legs and feet bare ; in the back seat me and my wife ; under our feet, plenty of lunch and things ; among us a great deal of fun in broken Tahitian, one of the natives, the chief of the village, being a great friend of mine. Indeed we have exchanged names, so that he is now called Rui, the nearest they can come to Louis, for they have no 'l' and no 's' in their language. Rui is six feet three and a magnificent man.

" We drive between the sea, which makes a great noise, and the mountains ; the road is cut

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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through a forest mostly of fruit trees, the very creepers, which take the place of our ivy, heavy with a great and delicious fruit. Presently we come to a house in a pretty garden, quite by itself, very nicely kept, the doors and windows open, no one about, and no noise but that of the sea. It looked like a house in a fairy-tale, and just beyond we must ford a river, and there we saw the inhabitants. Just in the mouth of the river, where it met the sea waves, they were ducking and bathing and screaming together like a covey of birds : seven or eight little naked brown boys and girls as happy as the day was long ; and on the banks of the stream beside them, real toys—toy ships, full rigged, and with their sails set, though they were lying in the dust on their beam ends. And then I knew for sure they were all children in a fairy story, living alone together in that lonely house, with the only toys in all the island : and that I had myself driven, in my four-wheeled gig, into a corner of the fairy story, and the question was, should I get out again ? But it was all right ; I guess only one of the wheels of the gig had got into the fairy story ; and the next jolt the whole

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## An Island Village

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thing vanished, and we drove on in our sea-side forest as before, and I have the honour to be Tomarcher's valued correspondent, Teriitera, which he was previously known as

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON."

Perhaps because he was so busy with his book, R. L. S. himself did not write much more from Tautira. But his wife fills in the story. She too begins : " I write you from fairyland, where we are living in a fairy story, the guests of a beautiful brown princess." " Chance " brought them, for in those days nobody could tell them anything about Tautira except that it was very remote, very wild but very fine. There, therefore, Louis gains health and strength every day, takes sea baths and swims, and lives almost entirely in the open air as nearly without clothes as possible. Ori looks more like a Roman Emperor in bronze than words can express and inhabits a " bird-cage " house. They go to feasts crowned with flowers ; Louis makes a speech ; they live almost entirely on native food, and Rui is literally a brother. Thus, then, when the message comes that the

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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*Casco* is not ready or likely to be for some weeks, when their money is finished and when they dare not go to an hotel, Ori (or Rui) offers all that he has. "Louis dropped his head into his hands and wept." For a couple of months they stayed while Louis collected songs and legends, and when they left the parting was sad indeed.

Ori himself wrote of that parting :

"We passed that night in the impatience of grief. . . . It is my dear Teriitera makes the only riches I desire in this world. It is your eyes that I desire to see again. It must be that your body and my body shall eat together at our table : that is what would make my heart content. But now we are separated. May God be with you all. May His word and His mercy go with you, so that you may be well and we also, according to the words of Paul. ORI A ORI ; that is to say Rui."

Mrs. Stevenson adds : "After reading this to me Louis has left in tears saying that he is not worthy that such a letter should be written to him." The "brothers" did not meet again.

I have met but one native in Tahiti who remembered Stevenson. He is a very old man who held





[Paul Engdahl.

Preparing for a feast.

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## An Island Village

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my hand long merely because I professed my admiration for the Master. And he said: "We shall never see his like again in Tahiti. He is dead, and we are dying. None of the Europeans are as he was, whose body, soul and spirit were *white as the moon and pure as the stars.*"

Thirty-three years later I strolled through Tautira village in the evening for the first time. The grass-grown street was pleasant. The view from the site of Stevenson's house was lovely as his wife's description of it. A few folk were about—a cheery soul on a horse who stopped to speak in French; some children in dirty frocks and torn knickerbockers (or apologies for those articles); women, in the universal shapeless Mother Hubbard, dodging in and out of houses cheerfully; pigs; fowls and goats. It was very quiet, and the surf sang on the reef in an endless monotone. And first, thereafter, I came on the church.

Imagine a weather-beaten iron and wood rectangle that had once been painted. Its windows alone suggested ecclesiastical architecture, but why I could hardly say. Perhaps because they were tall, unlike any other windows in the village

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and criss-crossed with rusty iron bars. The glass in them was practically all broken. The door swung on its hinges. The yard about was fenced and rough with long grass. The gate had gone. I went in.

It had been filled with English varnished hard upright ugly pews for a people who habitually sat on the floor with easy grace. These pews curved round and ran away from, in empty legions, an enormous pulpit to which two curved stairways, each with a discoloured brass rail, ascended. Before it, elevated, were two pews, and in the lower a table covered with a torn red rep cloth with a faded gold fringe. In the pulpit, on a red rat-nibbled cushion with tarnished gold tassels, lay a book—the only book in the place whose barn-like immensity and empty pews terrified me. Perhaps not surprisingly it was a copy of the Old Testament in Tahitian. I do not mean that the New Testament is not read. No doubt it is. But its absence was not without significance, for the spirit of the New Testament seemed far to seek.

A few more houses, and I struck the first of the half-dozen Chinese stores. You can always tell a

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## An Island Village

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Chinese store. There are no flowers about it, but trampled earth and dirt. There will be yellow dirty children and a woman in black with black trousers. Within you will see shelves containing canned foods of all sorts, fly-blown advertisements, filthy paper, copies of old American newspapers, empty boxes and more dirt. There is also a smell. These things strike you, for the Tahitians are clean. They bathe twice and more a day. There are no old cans, dirty papers and empty boxes about their houses. And though to-day you have to search to find a real native, though Western villas accumulate dirt, yet still the half- and quarter-castes are clean. The bed at the chief's house at which I slept was spotless.

But the Chinese are set for a sign in the land. In a little it will be wholly Chinese. They save, they work, they buy land, they conserve it by sound dispositions—not leaving it in the simple silly Tahitian way to the family or families of the owner to be divided up infinitesimally and unprofitably, and they are priests and prophets of Commerce and Trade. They buy what the land produces and send it away, and they import what

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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it does not produce and sell it at a further profit. They preach the great Law of Progress : Be Ye Content Never With The Things That Ye Have. They are the mendicant friars of the great Commercial Church. The Law orders clothes and they supply them ; the Trade wants coco-nuts and offers accordions and bully beef, and they go between. They are always industrious. They are rarely dishonest—personally I am amazed at their honesty. They are easy to tax and rule. The Government could hardly exist without them. Surely it is a small matter that the Tahitian cannot exist with them. He lived in a Garden of Eden with the rules of the Sermon on the Mount and neither of those will give you even, say, twenty-five per cent.

The Chinese store was useful. There was nothing much to eat in the village, for the Chinese buy up all that is good and send it to Papeete market, and the half-caste folk have long been disabused of the notion that white men are demi-gods and guests anyway, for whom the whole village should turn out and provide. Besides, it has largely forgotten how to provide. There is no excuse, but it has fallen to the lure of Chinese-

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## An Island Village

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baked 'bread, coffee and sardines. The chief, indeed, sold me a chicken, and the Chinese stores provided at a price Yosemite peas, New Zealand beef, French pâté de fois gras, and Californian sardines in tomato sauce. The chicken was fried in "Snowdrift" and we had a "K" jam. The moon was Tahitian however.

During the evening two most interesting events occurred. The first was a conversation which I had with my hearty and entertaining American companion. He was able to give me sketches of the development of Standard Oil, the Ford automobile and the Steel Trust such as I had never heard before. I shared with him amazement at the ability, rise and present fortune of their various founders. I was impressed afresh with the wonders of American wireless, engineering, flying and general acumen. We talked of the utilisation of the great regular currents of air which cross and recross the entire continent and foresaw the day when you would ascend to a certain level and speed from New York to San Francisco in a few hours. Perhaps the Chinese will never own Tahiti after all. Perhaps it will become a Californian tea-garden.

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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And, mind you, it was interesting, and it is not 'bunk.'

Then our host suggested that we should attend a 'himine' as it was Saturday evening. A 'himine' is really a Protestant prayer-meeting Tahitianised. It is held in a 'parish hall' which is usually more or less native built, and the easy-going native pastors have allowed it to become mere hymn-singing. All the village was going, and we went. We went through the darkness under the moon, with the roar of the surf in our ears. We were very quiet and orderly.

Unlike the church there were no pews in the thatched building and the congregation sat on the floor. Within was darkness and no furniture at all except for a school-bench in a corner, one oil lamp and two chairs provided for us against the wall. At the bench sat the pastor, and more of him anon. He rose, shook hands with us and went back to his desk.

There was no apparent order, no announcement of a hymn, no instrument, no book. No hymn appeared to be sung completely through. The folk crouched on the floor in the semi-darkness,

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## An Island Village

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the women more or less in front, the men behind. The men smoked cigarettes occasionally, and spat. In intervals there was desultory conversation, possibly as to the next item. A woman appeared to lead, and appeared to lead at will. Each hymn had been Tahitianised as it were, and ended universally on a long drawn-out minor note which was prolonged interminably and very mournfully. The syncopation was remarkable, but the hymns seemed to me very much alike.

This unaccompanied singing is said to be very impressive and musical. Perhaps it is sometimes, though I think, like everything else in the Pacific, that is one of the things that is said. For me, one incident, if one could call it an incident, is indelibly fixed on my memory. The pastor sat throughout at his desk, taking no part, his head bowed, his black coat and collar just visible in the smoky lamp-light. A Bible (I suppose) was open in front of him, and maybe he was only meditating a sermon or dosing or nursing a headache. I do not know. But I shall see him ever, that motionless black figure, with bowed shoulders over the frayed book, silent, seemingly stricken, while in the



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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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shadows the low sad notes of a dying race died melancholy away.

And—a last dream—Robert Louis Stevenson attended in his day the opening and consecration of the Tautira church.



[W. Grabe, Tahiti.

" R.L.S. attended the consecration of the Tautira Church."

CHAPTER XI  
TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

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## To-day and To-morrow

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### CHAPTER XI

#### TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

IN Tautira, in Taiarapu generally, in Papeari, anything that lingers of the Polynesian tradition must be sought, and since, in conversation, one is always being asked of the natives of to-day, of the sort of life they and we together lead, and of the future, I propose from Tautira to write a little of it. Is there anything left of the people and customs that Hermann Melville saw and described in the Marquesas, Polynesians as were these? Can one still find in Tahiti the atmosphere of the South Seas romance? Can one, to be frank, throw off one's clothes, wed a lovely dusky maiden, and live for nothing on the fruits of the earth and the spoils of the sea?

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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The answer to these and similar questions is that Tahiti is an isle of dreams. Dreams are dreams. They are not realities. They may be very lovely, they may make life worth living, but they will not themselves fill the belly or clothe the back. And the results to-day of banking on Hermann Melville and later writers of his kind are extremely unpleasant. There comes to Tahiti a regular stream of nature-worshippers and beauty seekers (to give them the pleasantest names) who end in hospital or prison or steerage on a cargo steamer or the cemetery and who make themselves a great nuisance in the process. If publicity will do anything to stop them, let me do it. It is worth doing in the interests of those of us who live there, and even in their own.

As has been said, the old Tahiti is as dead as the Middle Ages. Its people have been exterminated, its beauty has been ravished, its very tradition almost obliterated. The tourist of a day or even of a month sees no more of the real Tahiti of the past than he would see at a well conducted Colonial Exhibition. If he wants amorous adventure he had much better go to Paris. If he wants

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## To-day and To-morrow

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primitive simplicity he had much better go, as quickly as possible, for it will shortly be too late even there, to Central Africa. And if he wants to get every material necessity for nothing he had better shoot himself at once, for as far as I know such things are not to be obtained without labour save, on some accounts, on the Astral Plane.

As a matter of fact, I wish to write deliberately even more strongly than this. The average young tourist who comes to Tahiti runs an even greater chance of contracting venereal disease than anywhere else perhaps in the world. The average lunatic in search of the simple life usually leaves in six months to rid himself of elephantiasis or something worse. The individual who, with the best will in the world, seeks in Tahiti an easy living, almost certainly departs broken-hearted in less. You cannot do the Hermann Melville stunt at all, there is no scope for intelligence, and in the ordinary labour market you must compete with half-caste Chinese. It is just possible to marry a rich half-caste and live for the rest of your life on her property, but the chance is only about as good as that of winning a first prize in the Calcutta sweep.

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You must either have an income, or a source of revenue derived from outside, or a large capital which can be invested in plantations, if you wish to be anything more in Tahiti than a passing tourist. And if you are a passing tourist, you will probably see no more of the real Tahiti than in Paris of French family life. No ; stick to O'Brien and keep your dreams.

There was a time in Tahiti when the fruits of the earth were held in common and when you could walk along and pick them. To-day we have land laws, and if you do that you break them and you will end up in prison. There was a time when the fisherman would gladly share his catch with you, but to-day he sends his superfluities to Papeete market where charity is as far to seek as in Covent Garden or Billingsgate. There was a time when damsels, sporting on the banks of the rivers, would call to you to join them and thereafter take you home and keep you for as long as you cared to stay. To-day there are few women by the rivers, and those married women of doubtful beauty washing the household linen, whose corrugated iron and wooden houses are no more easy of entrance than



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## To-day and To-morrow

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those of England and America. And as for the damsels who will sport with you on river banks, they must be obtained from Papeete, from another 'market,' and it is you who will have to keep them. The gods of Tahiti to-day are the gods of civilised men. With money you can buy every and any thing, from whiskey-and-soda and ice, which will be delivered daily by motor at your door if you ring up for it on the telephone, to theatre tickets and taxi-cabs, and without money you must take off your coat and work—or starve. That is the plain truth.

There is Polynesian blood in Tahiti, but it is rare indeed to find it unmixed. Equally there is a strain of the old Polynesian spirit in the half-caste people, but it is not easy to distinguish it. It has been beaten and bludgeoned and tamed to such an extent that it has lost much of its distinguishing virtue. Visitors complete its shame by artificially stimulating it, making "native" girls drunk, for example, that they may dance fragmentary *hula-hulas*, if possible, towards morning, in the nude. And passing by that sort of thing, the modern outlet of cinema and mail-boat

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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and motor-car is equally at enmity with the real spirit of Polynesia. Lighthearted and naïvete exists, but it has been wrested away from its natural setting and from spontaneity. Nothing has been allowed to remain what it once was—innocent. There is the trail of the serpent in every forest glade, and several churches in each district.

But thus pictures of “ native life ” are entirely misleading. Of those in this article, for example, one is a photograph of a real Polynesian type such as one might be ten years in the island and never see, and the other is the best I could get of the present stock ; but Mr. Crake had hard work to persuade both to dress for the occasion as they would have appeared fifty or more years ago. If you met either on the quay, they would be dressed in Parisian frocks, hats, shoes, and silk stockings. The *pareus* in the picture are forbidden by law in Papeete. The figures in dance costumes were taken at the annual July 14 French National Fête when bands of dancers from the district, in native dresses over trousers and skirts and blouses, dance *hula-hulas* from which the essential verve has been abstracted in the interests of “ morality.” Mr. Crake

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## To-day and To-morrow

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persuaded a chief from Tubuai and his daughter to lift their canoe from the lagoon as in old times. The essentially native houses are hard to seek, and Gauguin's *vahine* lives in one only because she is too poor to build with wood and iron. Such as those built on piles in the lagoon hardly exist ; it is left for a few of us dreaming white men to reconstruct them. Double and sailing canoes have long since disappeared, and native cookery is reserved for feast days with rare exceptions ; and the arts of common life—from *tapa* cloth to mother-of-pearl fish-hooks—have been killed by the stores. This is the bitter truth, let the chance journalist say what he will.

To speak personally, I do not think I have ever been more disappointed than during the first month of my arrival in Tahiti. The obtaining of a house was attended with as much beastliness as it is in London, perhaps with more, for swindling in London in such matters is impersonal. Having obtained it, the ' natives ' about revolted me. Perhaps a dozen houses were scattered along the couple of miles of shore on either side of my abode—the old house of Paul Gauguin—and of their in-

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habitants there was not one who attempted friendliness, scarcely one who would so much as smile in exchange for a greeting, and certainly not one who was physically beautiful. They all wore extremely ugly European dresses. The children would not play with you, and imps of five and six would hustle into clothing if you came upon them bathing. Of a laughter-loving, brown-skinned, beautiful, indolent people, bathing in sea and river half the day and weaving wreaths for their hair the rest, there was no trace. There was a largely diseased or deformed scanty peasantry wresting a poor living from their tiny holdings or from the sea. One's dealings were with Chinese store-keepers or Papeete tradesmen or American-speaking landlords or French officials. Life was simple in many ways, it is true : time did not matter ; conventions could be set at naught ; the land was lovely, the climate golden, the sea superb ; but of the romance of a South Sea island there was practically no trace.

The first person I met who had the spirit of the Polynesian people in him was undoubtedly an American, an extremely educated man, with



“Such as these built on piles in the lagoon hardly exist.”

[*W. Drake, Tahiti.*

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money, living alone as far as he could get from Papeete. The second turned out to be, perhaps, when I got to know him well, a man with small trace of real Polynesian blood whose own amusing personal character has to be understood before one perceives that it is in reality ordered throughout by the influence of his Tahitian ancestors. It is rather in these, and in others like them, that one comes to see that very light-heartedness, naïvete, innocence of the real sort, that civilisation has crushed out of the more properly termed "native." There, indeed, one finds entire absence of bargaining and business in dealing with friends, a spontaneous generosity, a simple liking for beauty and good-comradeship, standards of conduct that are dictated by the heart and not by Society, and a rich ease in eating and drinking and loving that is of the golden age. And it is remnants of such things that one finds, when one gets to know them, among the 'natives.'

Thus it is still instinctive with these people to pick and weave flowers into wreaths as they walk the roads or return from the hills. They still do not understand money, in our sense of understand-

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ing. Even a street girl of Papeete will sell herself for a cinema ticket or a ride in a motor-car rather than for the money which will purchase either ten times over. The personal element is still first with them. Class distinctions are still unnatural. The servant calls his master by his Christian name. They are still at bottom modest without being prudes, and animally impulsive and eager without being mercenary. They still love best the simple things—moonlight nights, the dappling sun on water, the scent of flowers. The terribly important things of Europe and America are still playthings with them—house furniture, automobiles, gramophones and dresses. And I think it is true to say that, despite all disillusionment, the best of them still think that the English aristocracy is essentially "noble," and London and Paris cities of enchantment. More, thinking that, the best of them still love Tahiti and dread to leave her.

I have seen Tahitian maids, weeping bitterly, embrace and kiss their American master and mistress of a month, bedecking them with wreaths and loading them with gifts, while the steamer blew her final siren. When a "native" visitor can sit

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## To-day and To-morrow

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at his ease and chat with an English lady, and then rise and say without a trace of self-consciousness : " Excuse me ; I think I'll just go to the kitchen and have a talk with the cook "—that is the spirit of Polynesia. Lovaina, the great hostess of the Tiare Hotel, was ruined through keeping guests *because* they could not pay, and although she, alas, has passed over, there are still a few such who remain. But such as these are not common, and if you think to be welcomed as was Captain Cook do not come to Tahiti.

The Utopia of Mr. H. G. Wells's " Men Like Gods " is more likely than any revival of the old Polynesia. There is an utter certainty that total extinction waits the race, at any rate in the Eastern Pacific. The actual blood will run ever more thin and ever more mixed until it is gone, the veritable spirit will vanish away ever more swiftly before aeroplanes, wireless, and " tourism." It is a wonder that anything at all remains. There have been proposals already to make the island a Honolulu, with great modern hotels, casinos, golf courses, fishing clubs and tourist agencies. No modern Government could afford to expel the Chinese, and



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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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no power on earth could put back the clock and ante-date the missionary. And even if that could be done, we have to face it that there are not enough people who care apparently left alive on earth to wish to get rid of the trader and the profiteer. That is to-day the "sign" of Tahiti in the earth. The world has literally no use for the spirit of old Polynesia. Why weep about it, or make a song? Why blame the missionary or the trader? If we were to discover some Tahiti again to-day we should destroy it, not in a hundred years, but in ten, in one. As the empire of the Mediterranean passed to the Atlantic, so that of the Atlantic is passing surely to the Pacific. The future of the world rests for the coming century or two with the powers which border there. They may make Tahiti a play-ground or a naval base or an aerodrome (if the home of seaplanes is an aerodrome), but they would not even wish to give us back a paradise.

This is the world, my masters, which our modern Frankensteins have conjured into being from the materials of Tahiti, and from such as her. For it have been sacrificed simplicity, nobility and beauty.



"Lifting the canoe."

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## To-day and To-morrow

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It is impossible not to stand in amazement before the marvel of it. Our presses turn out books by the hundred, our playwrights produce plays by the score which picture the South Sea islands as romantic places of unspoiled beauty, of matchless loving women, of unsophisticated living—veritable Edens. The public like it, they say. And yet 'the public' have ruined these Edens of which they dream, and are ruining them every day. One is forced to feel that while we have souls that can admire, we have hands which can do nothing but destroy and feet that can only befoul. Walking in the soft Pacific breeze on the lovely lonely beaches by the swaying singing palms, it is possible almost to wish that the modern Atlantis may be utterly destroyed in the next war and leave us to our peace and to what is left of our dreams.

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CHAPTER XII  
THE LAST SUNSET



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## The Last Sunset

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### CHAPTER XII

#### THE LAST SUNSET

HAS anyone—save some twenty-four hour tourists who have not been beyond Papeete and who have been disappointed of a pleasant shock by the empty rubbish that the cinemas advertise as “ real native *hula-hulas* ”—has any honest visitor left Tahiti without regret ? It is hard to think so. And the poet and the artist has invariably gone with something more than sorrow.

Listen to Rupert Brooke : “ I was sad at heart to leave Tahiti. But I resigned myself to the vessel, and watched the green shores and rocky peaks fade with hardly a pang. I had told so many of those that loved me, so often, ‘ Oh, yes, I’ll come

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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back—next year perhaps, or the year after’—that I suppose I had begun to believe it myself. It was only yesterday, when I knew that the Southern Cross had left me, that I suddenly realised that I had left behind those lovely places and lovely people, perhaps for ever. I reflected that there was surely nothing else like them in this world, and very probably nothing in the next, and that I was going far away from gentleness and beauty and kindliness, and the smell of the lagoons, and the thrill of that dancing, and the scarlet of the flamboyants, and the white and gold of other flowers ; and that I was going to America, which is full of harshness and hideous sights, and ugly people and civilisation, and corruption, and bloodiness, and all evil. So I wept a little, and very sensibly went to bed. . . .”

And Mr. Somerset Maugham has said something of the same sort very poignantly : “ The breeze was laden still with the pleasant odours of the land. Tahiti was very far away, and I knew that I should never see it again. A chapter of my life was closed, and I felt a little nearer to inevitable death.”





[W. Crabe, Tahiti.]

“The green shores and rocky peaks.”

p. 198.

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## The Last Sunset

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All this, the reader might suppose, would be true also of any other beautiful place, but there is a special sense in which it is true of Tahiti even now, ten years and more since the Tahiti of which the words were written. But it is not too easy to see for oneself, still less to convey, the reason. If my attempt be over-personal, pardon me.

If you stay in Tahiti a month or six, and have not too thin a purse, and take one of the little villas in the country, you can have a lovely holiday. You can swim and walk and picnic and be idle through languorous days and moonlit nights, and you can probably meet a few 'nice' people like yourself who are doing the same thing. You will take an album full of indifferent photographs and delight in shewing them to your friends for a very long time, the while you dilate upon the charm of the South Seas. You will be genuinely sorry to go when your month (or six) is up, and you will lean over the rail as the steamer leaves the quay and say that you must come again. But you will have experienced nothing at all of what I mean.

I expect I am a sentimental fool, or maybe

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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writing in a mood. Yes, that is it ; it is just a mood. In England, shortly, I shall know that what I am going to write now is all rubbish, really, and that the world is in fact the perfectly straightforward proposition that it appears to be to most people. A matter of real estate on a big scale, that is all. And that when one talks of the spirit of a place one is ape-ing the poets, and that when one honestly thinks that that spirit can try your spirit one is damned with the worst of them. And yet that is precisely what I do mean.

There is something about Tahiti which is not to be found in other beautiful places, nor to be felt on a picnic party in jolly company even here—something which lingers in her remote and desecrated valleys, which hides behind the brilliant sunkissed beauty of her long deserted beaches, which, as you walk on a scented night among the palms, breathes upon your face. Alone on the reef, with the waves breaking on the living coral upon which you stand ; up in some high *mape* grove where the dim light filters through to the murmuring stream at your feet ; wandering by yourself far in among the impenetrable mountains,

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## The Last Sunset

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when across the gulf of air come sailing the snow-white tropic birds with the floating plume of their white tailfeathers like a long streamer behind them; at such times it can be felt. It is there, despite the fact that Tahiti is now but an empty shell of beauty, from which the glory is largely departed and which the majority of her present owners and visitors merely abuse. And by way of illustration I shall dare to say two things.

In an English cathedral of to-day—say Ely or Peterborough, or Lincoln or Chester—it is impossible not to be aware of a spirit that is passed, a something gracious, vital, lovely, whose ghost but lingers on the air. The stones remain in all their loveliness; there is music and prayer and comely furnishing; waiving controversy, the present holders put these buildings to a decent use; but, even if one is a heathen or a heretic, one knows that something is gone to which this building properly belongs. One may not even feel, taking all in all, that one wants that ancient religion, that monasticism, that strange mediæval life which created the place, back again, but of that I do not speak. I merely use the illustration: standing there alone

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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in the grave dim silent aisles one knows sometimes the light breath of the spirit haunting the place in which it came to birth, in which it is now a stranger, from which it must shortly wholly fade.

In some such way I am aware of the spirit of Tahiti.

Or again. I have a friend whose story, simple as it is, will serve. He was once wealthy by inheritance and a painter for pleasure. A few years ago he was ruined quite completely. He faced his poverty with a brave heart and left Europe for he knew not what new land in which to labour for his living. The tramp steamer on which he was given a passage touched Canada, the States, Australia, but he stayed in none. In time he made Tahiti. A native of whom I have spoken in this book offered him for nothing a simple hut on a point by the sea among the coconuts in which to rest and paint and learn Tahiti. After some months he was able to acquire a tangled tropic valley in a remote district, and he moved there unhesitatingly. He lives now in a small bamboo and pandanus house ; he has planted, and is plant-



[*Paul Engdahl.*

**Preparing Vanilla.**

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## The Last Sunset

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ing coconuts, avocado pears, vanilla and other things in clearings he makes with the utmost of toil and battle; his skin is as brown as a native's; his food for weeks but theirs—plantains, taro, bread-fruit. He has been poor enough not to be able to buy a tin of dripping in which to fry bananas. He paints when he is not too physically tired, which is not often yet. He is alone except for a few natives and one white neighbour. When he makes in a month the wages of my Chinese cook, he counts himself a lucky man, and that he does by harvesting his banana or orange crop at great labour for the Papeete native market.

Yet he is more than a happy man. I think it is honestly true to say that he is glad he lost his fortune. He wants to visit and bid farewell to his old parents, but that will be his last willing truck with Europe. He has found what I dimly sense. He is not an extravagant poet or a wild man of the woods; he has not in any way 'gone native,' living with or on a native woman; he has not forgotten his education or lost his manners. But he has found something, he has been tested by something, he has been accepted by some-

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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thing. He is politely amazed that I leave the Pacific.

In some such way I am aware of the spirit of Tahiti.

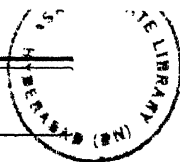
But I leave, and I shall not come back. For the last time I shall see the sun set in all its indescribable unearthly beauty behind Moorea. Reflecting that there is nothing else like it in this world and very probably nothing in the next, I shall turn from the smell of the lagoons and the scarlet of the flamboyants and the far green slopes to the upholstered saloon and the chatter of passengers and the mail steamer's dinner. But I am under no delusion. It is I that have been tried and found wanting. It is I that am outcast for ever from the real Tahiti and dare not insult her again by my return. Here the veil of reality between this world and the true is thin, thin indeed, and here one may catch a whisper as one listens, or may glimpse the start of a wing. I have suspected it in many places, but known it in none so much as here. And therefore here I have learned the bitter truth. I belong to "the harshness and hideous sights, and ugly people, and civilisation, and



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## The Last Sunset

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corruption, and bloodiness, and all evil." I do not belong here. I cannot become a child again and be born anew in this house. It would welcome me again as a guest, but I do not want that and I never can become an heir. Not now in all the world shall I ever lift the veil or learn the secret I came thus far to seek. Oh the folly, the madness of it! Here is peace; here is beauty as a golden ladder up to the far and unknown heaven of our hope; here is simple, quiet living, boundless wealth, a sure reward. In a thousand islands it is here, and Tahiti keeps the door. But I go. I must have people and self-complacent civilisation and— and London, I suppose. I have thought the baubles real too long ever to escape the fetters of their glittering delusion. But when my last sun sets behind Moorea in crimson and gold, or in a fairy loveliness of pale green and olive and yellow, I shall know beyond dispute that a chapter of my life is closed, and I shall feel more than a little nearer to inevitable death.

*Punaauia. July 15, 1923.*

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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*S.S. El Kantara.*

*At sea off the Paumotus.*

*September 10, 1923.*

I thought that this book was finished in Tahiti when I wrote this last chapter under the date above, and what I have written, I have written. It has its message. It shall stand. But even as I saw the last sunset, though in the eleventh hour, the strange Wheel of Life swung unexpectedly, and I know, now that I can take breath, that I leave but to return. I have been freed to choose. I can become an heir.

I wonder if you understand, 'reader'—as they used to say in the solid old Victorian novels that were worth so much more than the flimsy stuff we write. I wonder if you understand what it is that leads one to the Isle of Dreams? This has become a strangely, almost indecently, intimate book, and since it may have a message for somebody, foolish as it seems to write it, I shall dare to add a line or two. Tahiti stands for a great deal. What would you do if you made ten thousand pounds? Let

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## The Last Sunset

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us reckon it up : a flat in London, a splendid car, theatres, the doors of some famous club swung open, the companionship of literary and artistic men and women, admiration, the certainty of seeing the children of your brain and heart on the St. Pancras bookstall. 'Reader,' reckon it up. Odd ! there are a few thousand of you that will read this, and to each of you I say : What would you do if you made ten thousand pounds ?

Little, lone, lovely, remote Tahiti ; there, in the shrine that we so ruthlessly desecrated, breathes yet the spirit of a more than Homeric age. How I see the black or silver or golden beaches, dappled with the shade of the wind-frayed coconut palms. How I hear the long Pacific rollers breaking in fury on the sharp steep of the coral reef and spouting twenty feet, or thirty, in their lovely rage. How I stand a-tremble again while the starlight glistens on grass lawn and shaken fan, and there is a note on the air that surely, surely, one day I shall hear. How I listen while the sun, new risen in the glory of all legendary kings, paints on the lagoon a pathway out to light. How, when

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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the moon veils on the misty mountain crags, I  
hear an old, old song. . . . What shall we do with  
ten times ten thousand pounds? "We take the  
golden road to Samarkand."



[W. Crane, Tahiti.]

"The misty mountains."

p. 208.

CHAPTER XIII  
AN EPISODE OF CHINA



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## An Episode of China

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### CHAPTER XIII

#### AN EPISODE OF CHINA

YET, at this point, I will have something to say of the Chinese.

It was no more than a jest of circumstance that the *Nang-Li* made Papeete Harbour on the Fourteenth of July, but the fact heightens the colour of this story. For Tahiti keeps the Fourteenth with the enthusiasm of the boulevards, or maybe with more. At the time of the original Fourteenth, the inhabitants of Tahiti were only, it is true, in the first stages of their initiation into the delights of rum, the truths of Christianity and the embraces of white men ; and some generations had to pass, a small war or two to be fought, the squabbles of Catholic



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and Protestant missionaries to be adjusted and the population thinned to appreciable approach to extermination, before the blessings of the Republic, then so gloriously vindicated, were firmly settled upon the survivors. For these and all its other benefits Tahiti, however, can now give public thanks on the Fourteenth, as can all realms over which the tricolour waves. Tahiti is indeed officially encouraged to do so. The thronging Chinese, the half and quarter and infinitely mixed breeds, the French officials, the Anglo-Saxon traders, the American tourists and that one per cent of the population that is still Tahitian, all unite in a glad orgy of forgetfulness. And, moralise as one may, it remains that it is well. The past is beyond recall, and we moderns here would die like the Marquesans of melancholy if we could not discount the future.

So Papeete stirs in her year-long slumber and decks herself for four official days of gaiety. Along the water-front, on either side of the bust of Bougainville, speculative citizens erect booths for the sale of champagne and the light wines of France. A few lay down dancing floors and instal orchestras

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versed in fox-trots ; the rest reserve a ring on the grass and trust to the mouth-organs, concertinas and mandolines of their customers. Up both sides of the street which runs at right angles to the waterfront and reaches the square with the bandstand before the Governor's residence, shooting galleries hoop-las, confetti booths, lucky wheels and swings of a curiously dwarf order, permitting only a gentle rocking as perhaps suitable to the Pacific and Gallic fancy, offer the fun of the fair. In the square itself judges instal themselves in the bandstand, left and right are covered enclosures for the chairs of Europeans and officialdom respectively, and all about a central empty space are built tiers of benches for the parti-coloured crowd from the streets.

Of primary public attraction are the *himenas* and *hula-hulas* of competing bands from all districts of the island, which commence with a display on the night of the thirteenth and are judged officially on the following two mornings ; but there is a ball on the night of the Fourteenth, a race meeting on the afternoon of the sixteenth, and two boxing contests for the championship of the

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"Eastern Pacific" were staged at the Theatre Moderne between stirring dramas produced but a fortnight's steam from us in the cinema paradises of California. The arrival of the *Nang-Li* on the morning of the Fourteenth was unofficial.

One is tempted to write at length of these festivities, so incredible, so solemn, so gay, so childish, so desperately civilised. The tinsel thickly cloaks reality ; but is a man to grieve at that, or be glad that some trace of reality still survives ? There are the *hula-hulas*, for example, strangely attractive in their way. Fantastically garbed in swaying grass-skirts, the girls wreathed and plumed, the little bands of performers eager and untiring, one by one they swing in behind a flag-bearer and go through their performance. It is best, of course, by night, when strings of Chinese lanterns cross and re-cross the square and the beat of native drums throbs out on the velvet Pacific dark. You can glance up at the stars enmeshed in the silvered fronds of coconut trees, and look back to the tossing brown limbs and flower-crowned heads under the coloured light. The *himenes*, too—the deep booming bass of the men



[W. Crane, Tahiti.

“ Native dresses *over* skirts and blouses.”

p. 214.

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on the edge of the sitting circle, the high, unique falsetto of the leader, the long drawn out final contraltos of the women—it is true, once heard you will never forget. Even the singers do not know the meaning of all they sing—songs of the old gods and the old ways, some of them. If only——

No ; I will not do it. Grudge you not Tahiti her last song. The gay stream of girls in their pretty bright frocks and hats, throwing their confetti with laughing dark eyes and quick brown hands ; the men, white-clad, wreathed too with ferns and flowers of *Tiare Tahiti* and pandanus, so magically sweet, who ogle and jostle them ; the groups that consume incredible quantities of the sweetest champagne or, as the francs fly, bottle after bottle of beer, the while they dance more and more vehemently, more and more unrestrainedly, in the end frankly and whole-heartedly erotic and bacchanalian—let them have their day. They are not responsible for the hideous incongruities and the smug hypocrisies that are here. Nor, wholly, are we. It is just human fate that the good is corrupted, that instinctive art is prostituted, that

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## Tahiti : Isle of Dreams

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a fine race dies ; and the wise way and the kind way, if the race can sing at all in the dying, is but to write of the song.

Through the gay jolly crowd then, dodging the confetti, praying to get off with but one bottle of that champagne at this hour of ten in the morning, I made my way to the *Nang-Li* and to my English friend among her officers. She lay like a leviathan in the sun, all the 7,000 tons of her, by the side of the fifty-ton schooners and the old *Flora* whose life is a miracle, and the squat *Cholita*. From her stern waved lazily the five-barred flag of the Chinese Republic, while the wharf was crowded with friends of her seven hundred Chinese passengers and still more of the merry-makers of the fête. I was greeted at the gang-way and welcomed aboard to be shown her every wonder, from the inlaid marbles of her saloon and smoke-room to the new gadgets of the bridge. German built, they have patched up the shell-hole we made in her, and she has been purchased by a wealthy Chinese company as the first of a fleet that will ply from Hong Kong to Lima by way of Australia and flaunt this new amazing flag in the Pacific trades. And



"The best of the present stock."

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## An Episode of China

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this was her return to her home port on her maiden voyage.

There are more Chinese in Peru than Peruvians. Chili would be in a hole without them. In French Oceania they will shortly be the only traders, with the exception of one or two big British and American copra-buying firms—even if these survive. In Tahiti they alone attempt to tame the rich soil of the mountain-slopes ; there are districts already almost wholly Chinese ; and more brown babies than one likes to think about have a suggestion of almond eyes and celestial features. Thus you will see that the *Nang-Li* was a portent. Our ancestors crowded once the fen-dykes of East Anglia to catch a glimpse of the dragon-beaks of the Northmen, and if other days have other methods, none the less the Tahitians of the fête might have pressed to the wharf to view the *Nang-Li* with much the same apprehension. But if I thought so as I went aboard, the doomed watchers obviously did not. With reason. In the twentieth century there are no sea-rovers, and it is our greatest pride to announce how carefully we preserve or nourish the political independence of smaller peoples.



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However, when I had seen the *Nang-Li* from her inlaid marbles to the blue porcelain of her state-rooms, my friend—with a trifle of hesitation—asked if I would care to see the fourth class. I begged an explanation, and he gave it to me. He also gave me eucalyptus for my handkerchief, and we set out.

Right forward, through the third-class accommodation, we climbed down below the water-line into the bowels of the ship. We found ourselves in one of three big compartments each housing some thirty persons. They lay on bunks in tiers, and there was a bird-cage arrangement of bunks also in the centre of the place. These were bare planking, with a little mat and a blanket to each, and since the *Nang-Li* is thoroughly modern, I have no doubt that all that was possible was done by way of cleanliness and ventilation.

But the twenty-nine Chinese men and one Chinese woman in that cabin were mostly too old ever to get on deck. A great many were too old to feed themselves, and while they were fed, I should not suppose that they were bothered much in regard to washing. No ; they lay there as they

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had been lying since the *Nang-Li* took them aboard in South America, and as they would lie until—well, until they reached the end of their voyage, perhaps in Canton. They were kept alive, my friend explained, by a tiny pill of opium, an occasional loaf and plenty of tea, and they were the first fruits of a philanthropic Chinese society's efforts in Lima which raised funds, partly by contribution and partly by charity, to enable the very old to go home to die.

The very old ! They ranged from ninety to well over a hundred, all the five-odd score of them. Wizenéd, the skin drawn tightly over cheekbones and skull, clad mostly in a shirt, some lay still as if already dead, others turned old eyes feebly to see us, a few greeted the stranger with the strangers' language of the land of their exile—*Buenos dias, Caballero*. One here was sitting up, the bony fingers of the aged trembling upon some little task ; another there, twisted sideways in a strange contortion of form ; and by the companion ladder one was on his feet. He had long white hair on his head, and a white straight-falling wispy beard. He had very alert eyes, over-bright. He stood

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swaying in his shirt and I held out my hand to him. He was one hundred and three years of age.

The thing was incredibly arresting and speculation irresistible. He had been a boy of thirteen when Queen Victoria came to the throne, a man of twenty-two when Canton was opened, with the Treaty Ports, to the first white-faced merchants. At the age of thirty-seven he heard the cannon of the foreign devils what time the British fleet bombarded his city in the Second Opium War, subsequently obtaining thereby the privileges of being able to buy Indian opium, of having foreign ambassadors about the court of his Emperor and of becoming a Christian if he pleased. Maybe failing at the time to realise these advantages, he got out with the rest the bow and arrows he had used five years before in the Taiping rebellion. Some time in his fifties he went to South America which had been his home for half a century. How did he live those fifty years, one wonders. . . .? No matter ; at long last, sailing from out the barbarous West, comes the *Nang-Li*, all the 7,000 tons of her, with electric light and oil-driven engines and a big cabin for old Chinamen. And he is helped

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aboard to the desire of his old heart and sails back to the China of his remembrance to lay his bones there. He lies on his planks I take it, and dreams his opium-scented dreams of old Canton—of *old* Canton.

The fête delayed the *Nang-Li* because our fellows would not load her, but the day following she was to leave at 10 a.m. At that hour I strolled down to say good-bye. My friend greeted me. "Damn it all," he said, "we're held up again. We lost four passengers of senile decay between Lima and this, and blest if our fifth doesn't die this morning! And they've got to make a coffin and hand him over to the Chinks here. They'll be a couple of hours. You remember—that old codger you shook hands with? Seemed good enough then, but went off flick. Well, look here, I've got to go and get busy. Come later, can you?"

So at the second hoot of the siren I went again. The liner was ready to cast off. Her seven hundred passengers lined her decks, and in the shade of the sheds on the wharf we clustered to watch and wait—Tahitian girls in their finery, men still wreathed, the Chinese element in force, two or

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three Europeans. Between us and the tall side of the ship, on the rough sunlit planking of the quay, stood a hearse. A ramshackle venerable thing of black paint, heavy hangings and tarnished gilt after the French extravagant pattern, it offended the soft blue skies, the warm genial sunny air. Two rough-coated, deplorable brown ponies drew it and a youth on the box smoked a cigarette. We waited interminably. A Chinese on board struck up a Chinese fiddle, and the passengers spat over the sides and threw down endless cigarette ends. High on the first-class deck the British skipper leaned genially over the rail. A junior English officer was at the head of the gangway, with two Chinese in a like uniform.

The coffin came up at last from the bowels of the ship, borne by four Tahitian labourers. The Chinese passengers glanced indifferently at it and spat again. The Chinese fiddle continued to twang. But as the bearers hove in sight the English officers bared their heads and we saw that they had covered the body with the ship's Chinese Republican flag. It was pushed into the hearse, the undertaker climbed to the box, the flag was

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gathered up by one of the *Nang-Li* people, and the crowd opened to let the brown ponies through.

They were being persuaded to trot as the third siren blew. Poor old one hundred and three! In how many ports had he heard that siren and thought perhaps the next would be Canton! How much, perhaps, while we junketed in Papeete, he had longed to hear it! Or perhaps he had ceased to reckon time or know its meaning. At any rate he will rest very quietly here, in a Chinese cemetery, surrounded by Chinese; and if, as he believed, his spirit ranges where he passed, he will not find Tahiti more unfamiliar than he would have found Canton.